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OFFICIAL REPORT

SECOND SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SIXTH PARLIAMENT
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND NORTHERN IRELAND
SIXTY-FIFTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SESSION 2016–2017

COMPRISING PERIOD
10 October 2016—21 October 2016
HER MAJESTY’S GOVERNMENT

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(FORMED BY THE RT HON. THERESA MAY, MP, JULY 2016)

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§ Members of the Government listed under more than one Department

SECOND CHURCH ESTATES COMMISSIONER, REPRESENTING CHURCH COMMISSIONERS—The Rt Hon. Dame Caroline Spelman, MP
10 October 2016
House of Commons

Monday 10 October 2016

The House met at half-past Two o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

EDUCATION

The Secretary of State was asked—

Office for Students

1. Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): If she will offer students places on the board of the Office for Students. [906514]

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening): I welcome the shadow Ministers to their roles and also, more importantly, welcome my new ministerial colleagues to theirs for our first oral questions session.

We have made it clear that the Office for Students must have student representation, and we will take every opportunity to embed student engagement in the culture and structure of the new organisation.

Kerry McCarthy: I thank the Secretary of State for confirming that. During the summer, I met students from the University of Bristol and the University of the West of England, who are very concerned about rising tuition fees, the scrapping of maintenance grants and, above all, the quality of teaching. Can she assure them that they will be listened to when they express concerns about those issues in connection with the Higher Education and Research Bill?

Justine Greening: In part, the Bill reflects our wish to secure value for money for students, which we are building into law for the first time. Our updating of the higher education regulatory framework is long overdue, and I am delighted that we are taking the opportunity to put the interests of students at the heart of it.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that we should beware the law of unintended consequences? Adding students to the board of the Office for Students would put at risk representation and engagement with students throughout the higher education system. Will she assure me, and the student community, that the OFS will put students at the heart of the system?

Justine Greening: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. I know that he has played an important role on the Public Bill Committee and presented his own proposals. As we have made clear, we do not want to be over-prescriptive. We want to set up the Office for Students and allow it to ensure that students have a voice not just through representation, but through the way in which the office itself works.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): The Higher Education Governance (Scotland) Act 2016, which the Scottish Government introduced in March, has given students a much stronger voice and increased their involvement in key decision making in Scotland’s universities. Does the Secretary of State agree that students deserve to participate more in the higher education sector, and will she look to the example set by Scotland to ensure that they can do so?

Justine Greening: I have no doubt that Scottish colleagues will wish to share the hon. Lady’s experience. As I have said, it is important to ensure that the voices of students
are heard ever more clearly, and that is precisely what the Bill is intended to achieve—among other things, including improving choice for students. As was pointed out earlier, we now have a funding system that requires students to pay tuition fees, and it is vital that they obtain value for money.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): I welcome my right hon. Friend to her post and congratulate her on becoming Secretary of State for one of the most interesting Departments.

I welcome student representation, but may I warn my right hon. Friend that there is a danger relating to who she decides should be representatives? The National Union of Students is no longer the undivisive organisation that it was once, and a number of universities have already decided that they want nothing to do with it. How will the Secretary of State choose the students who are to be represented on the new body?

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend sets out his concerns eloquently. During the Bill’s passage, we have made it clear that we want people on the OFS who have experience of representing, or indeed promoting, the interests of students. As I have said, the key requirement is for us not to be prescriptive, but to allow the new body to become established and then find sensible ways of ensuring—not just through the board itself, but more importantly, through the way in which it operates—it provides a strong voice for students and represents their interests.

Departmental Allocations

2. Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): How much she plans to allocate for work in her Department on (a) the fairer funding formula for schools and (b) the forthcoming Green Paper on grammar schools in the next six months.

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening): Both the national funding formula reform and the consultation document “Schools that work for everyone” are vital parts of the Government’s ambition for an education system that promotes social mobility and a true meritocracy. As my hon. Friend will know, work is under way on both. Future activity will be strongly driven by the outcomes of the second stage of consultation on the national funding formula and, of course, the Green Paper.

Heidi Allen: Given the mixed views on grammar schools and the huge amount of work that will be required to ensure that no child is left behind, which I certainly fear they might be, will the Secretary of State please explain how grammar schools can possibly be a higher priority than fixing the flawed funding model that has resulted in thousands of children being seriously underfunded for decades in counties such as mine?

Justine Greening: I very much recognise my hon. Friend’s concerns about funding. This was precisely why, shortly before the House went into the summer recess, I set out my determination to get on with the work of bringing forward a national funding formula. We will be responding to the first stage of the consultation shortly and at the same time setting out the next stage of how the formula will work in practice. We also need to challenge ourselves to look at how we can have more good school places, particularly in parts of the country where there are still not enough and particularly for disadvantaged students. We need to get on with both those pieces of work.

Mr Speaker: In wishing her a very happy birthday, I call Lucy Powell.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I have made a special journey down here today to ask the Secretary of State a question. There is another group of schools that offers real social mobility and in which the education gap is the most narrowed. More than 98% of these schools are rated good or outstanding, yet they are in the areas of highest deprivation and the majority of their children are eligible for free school meals. They are our much-valued nursery schools, but their funding is putting their ongoing viability at risk. Would it not be better if she focused on their continued attainment, rather than on grammar schools?

Justine Greening: I agree with the hon. Lady that early years provision is a vital part of the education system, which is precisely why we have been consulting on how we can have a sensible approach to its funding, but I disagree with her characterisation that we are cutting funding. That is simply not correct.

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): The Secretary of State will surely agree that fairer funding for schools is a top priority, but another priority must be to ensure that we have adequate skills training, especially in the professional and technical sectors. I believe that that should be a key objective of the Green Paper. Will she reassure the House that that is also her priority?

Justine Greening: I made it very clear in my Conservative party conference speech last week that one of our biggest challenges is to ensure that we make the same progress in technical education that we have seen in academic education over recent years. This is vital for the more than 50% of children and young people who do not go on to university, and it will be vital for our employers if we are to have a Brexit Britain that can be successful.

21. [906537] Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Nursery schools give children the best possible start in life. Now, as a consequence of the review of the funding formula, the funding in Birmingham could be cut by up to half, closing nursery schools all across the city. Does the Secretary of State not recognise the immensely damaging consequences that would flow from that, not least for social mobility? If we kick away the ladder of opportunity when a child is three or four, they might never recover.

Justine Greening: The reality is that we are providing an additional £55 million for maintained nursery schools for at least two years while we consult the sector. We are looking at children’s centres at the same time.

Martin Vickers ( Cleethorpes) (Con): Thanks to the casting vote of the Liberal Democrat mayor, North East Lincolnshire Council has approved a motion in support of grammar schools. Given that the coastal
communities have poor educational standards, may I invite the Secretary of State to allocate some of her Department’s time to looking at the situation in North East Lincolnshire?

**Justine Greening:** My hon. Friend rightly raises his concerns about ensuring that the young people and children in his area get the best possible start in life. We have published our Green Paper and are consulting on how we can achieve this. There are still too many parts of our country where good school places are not available to children, and that is unacceptable. We should look at all the measures that we can take to change that.

**Sammy Wilson** (East Antrim) (DUP): Is the Secretary of State encouraged by the fact that two thirds of those canvassed on this issue support the Prime Minister’s policy of increasing social mobility among those from poorer backgrounds through the increased provision of grammar schools? Will she assure us that she will not be deterred by siren voices or the barrage of criticism of this policy from those who are ideologically opposed to it even though they had the benefit of a grammar school education themselves?

**Justine Greening:** The hon. Gentleman sets out the situation very clearly. He points out that, for children on free school meals in particular, grammars are able to close the attainment gap because the progress that those children make is double that of their better-off classmates. Labour wants to close that opportunity down and we want to level it up—that is the difference.

**James Heappey** (Wells) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s comment that the national funding formula remains a priority. Schools in Somerset are hanging on for the introduction of that fairer funding model. Will she encourage the Chancellor to look favourably on the plight of rural schools so that they can be properly funded until that funding formula comes into being?

**Justine Greening:** I assure my hon. Friend that I am very conscious of the particular challenges that rural schools face. In fact, in the original first stage of consultation, the issues of sparsity and funding, and of looking at the percentages of children in schools, were on the table because they do matter. I am well aware of the issue, and we will try to do our best in the second stage of the consultation to ensure that the sorts of challenges that schools face and need funding for are met.

**Angela Rayner** (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): Given the cuts that have already been outlined by Members, can the Secretary of State tell the House whether she has secured new funds from the Treasury to meet the spending commitments outlined in the Green Paper?

**Justine Greening:** The Green Paper outlined additional funding from the Treasury in relation to setting up new grammars. The hon. Lady will be aware that, at the same time as steadily bearing down on the huge deficit that the previous Labour Government left us, we have managed to protect the real-terms core funding for schools, but that is no thanks to the legacy of financial disaster that was handed over to us.

**Angela Rayner:** I believe the word that the Secretary of State was looking for was “no”. Perhaps she can tell us how much has been spent on trying to find any facts to support the Government’s policy of segregated schools. Spending public money on policy without any evidential basis is simply wasting it. When she last came to the House, she could not cite a single piece of evidence that the policy would improve social mobility. Has she found any since?

**Justine Greening:** A lot of what the hon. Lady says is incorrect. She will be well aware that a report by the Sutton Trust clearly set out the improved attainment of free school meal children, in particular in grammar schools. It is totally untenable for her to set out her concerns about grammar schools while resolutely being opposed to any kind of consultation document that looks at how we should reform them. We want to look at how we can reform grammar schools. The education system has changed beyond all recognition over recent years, and it is right that we now look at what role grammars can play in a 21st century education system.

**Staying Put**

3. **Craig Whittaker** (Calder Valley) (Con): What steps her Department has taken to implement the Staying Put policy; and what progress her Department has made on expanding similar arrangements to children from residential care.

**Edward Timpson:** Since May 2014, we have provided £44 million to local authorities to implement Staying Put. The latest data indicate that 54% of 18-year-olds who are eligible to stay put chose to do so. That is a massive increase on what happened before—I am proud to say this—a Conservative-led Government changed the law. We have also seen 30% of 19-year-olds and 16% of 20-year-olds still living with their former foster carers. For those leaving residential care, we have announced plans to pilot a similar scheme, Staying Close.

**Craig Whittaker:** Sir Martin Narey’s recent review of the children’s homes estate recommended that the vulnerable 9% of looked-after children who are currently excluded from Staying Put arrangements are given the opportunity to take part in Staying Close. Will the Minister update the House on what plans he has for exploring Sir Martin’s recommendations?

**Edward Timpson:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question and his continued support for care leavers in this House. A key part of our new cross-Government care leavers’ strategy, “Keep On Caring”, was the commitment to introduce Staying Close, as recommended by Sir Martin Narey. We now intend to pilot Staying Close so that we can understand the costs and practical implications before there is a wider roll-out. Part of the next phase of the children’s social care innovation programme will be an invitation to organisations to work with us to develop projects that are aimed at transforming support for vulnerable children, including Staying Close.

**Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): As the Minister is clearly staying put, which many will welcome, will he ensure that he does what he can for those children in
residential care who want to stay put? Will he recognise the campaign of Every Child Leaving Care Matters, which is calling for exactly those provisions and changes on the basis that we should be looking after children who most need help—those children in care, particularly in residential care—in the same way that we do with our own children?

Edward Timpson: I am delighted to be staying put, and I will work closely with everybody to make sure that we get this right. Two people who are prominent in the Every Child Leaving Care Matters campaign are working with us to design the system that we want to create in the future.

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

4. Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): What plans her Department has to review the findings of joint inspections of local areas’ effectiveness in identifying and meeting the needs of children and young people who have special educational needs and/or disabilities when assessing the delivery of reforms to the SEND support system.

Edward Timpson: The new joint inspections mean that for the first time ever Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission are inspecting vital special educational needs and disability services, showing families what is working well and where services right across education, health and care can improve. The reports, seven of which have been published so far, with many encouraging findings, will enable improvement in individual areas, provide opportunities for local areas to learn from one another, and establish a rich and growing picture of performance nationally.

Jo Churchill: As the Minister is no doubt aware, in my constituency I have outstanding provision in the Priory School—I hope to visit its new facilities on Angel Hill and Mount Road shortly. However, there are challenges in this sector, particularly in ensuring that all children are supported to make the most of their talents and abilities. What is the Minister doing to look at the quality of education, health and care plans, the rate of conversions from statements, the timeliness of those transfers and the quality of them once received?

Edward Timpson: I can assure my hon. Friend. Friend that we are monitoring closely the rate of conversions from statements and the timeliness of transfers through our annual data collection process. When a local authority’s performance is a concern, we follow that up with our team of professional advisers to offer support and challenge. They will also check the quality of the plans in local authorities that they visit and offer advice on improvement. That is a key part of ensuring that our reforms work for children and young people with SEND.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): In Trafford, where we already have selective education, fewer than 250 children with special educational needs support statements or education, health and care plans attend grammar schools, and that is out of a total of more than 7,500 children in grammar schools in the borough. Can the Minister say how the needs of children with special educational needs and disabilities will be properly taken into account in the consultation on the proposals included in the Government’s Green Paper?

Edward Timpson: The consultation is about lifting all schools to improve for all children, and the SEND reforms that we introduced in 2014 apply to all schools so that they are providing the support and education that the children in their care need to succeed. As part of the consultation on how we can improve all schools, it is important that at its heart children with special educational needs are considered fully.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): I was pleased by the Government’s commitment of £200 million for capital projects for special schools, not least because the Orchard School in Newark is one of the special schools in the worst condition in the country. When will local authorities be able to make a bid for funding and is there anything more that the Government can do, because these schools are incredibly important but extremely expensive to replace or renovate?

Edward Timpson: My hon. Friend is right that we have managed to secure more than £200 million of capital funding for special schools to increase the number of placements in his area and many others. We will be giving more details shortly, but I am sure that many people not just in Newark but right across England will be looking forward to seeing how they can improve the facilities and support that are available for children with special educational needs.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): I heard the Minister’s response to my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), but I was dismayed that in the “Schools that work for everyone” Green Paper there was not one single mention of children with special educational needs or disabilities. Is it not true that this Government have simply forgotten about them?

Edward Timpson: I welcome the hon. Lady back to the Front Bench. I know that she has had a number of epiphanies in the past few months, going from a remainer to a leaver to a returner, but I am pleased that she has taken up her present role, where I know she is a good fit. It is Dyspraxia Awareness Week, and I know that she is a very strong supporter of the work that the Dyspraxia Foundation and others do. She knows a lot about that issue and I wish her well in her role.

The Green Paper looks at raising standards across all schools for all children, and it includes, as I said previously, children with special educational needs. I hope that the hon. Lady will work with us to make sure that they get the best possible deal.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Will the Minister ensure that those areas that do poorly in the inspections are made not only to work with, but to visit, those areas that do the very best, so that the worst can learn by the example of the best?

Edward Timpson: My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. One of the reasons why we want to hold local areas to account is to make sure that they do not just sit on their failures, but learn from other areas that are
bringing about success. One of our intentions is to make sure that we give them the opportunity to learn from others that do it better.

**Apprenticeships**

5. Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential effect of her Department’s proposed changes to apprenticeship funding rates on the take-up of apprenticeships.

Robert Halfon: The proposed apprenticeship funding policy is designed to support an increase in the quality and quantity of apprenticeships. Our proposals include incentives and support for employers and providers that will encourage the take-up of many more apprenticeship opportunities by people of all ages and backgrounds, giving many people their first step on the employment ladder of opportunity. We continue to engage with employers and providers, and we plan to publish the final policy shortly.

Mary Glindon: A recent National Audit Office report condemned the lack of contingency planning for apprenticeship funding reform. How does the Minister hope to address that?

Robert Halfon: We are busy with our plans to introduce the apprenticeship levy. By 2020, we will be spending more than double on apprenticeships, or £2.5 billion extra. We are well on the way towards achieving our target of 3 million apprenticeship starts by 2020, with over 500,000 starts in the past year alone.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Although I welcome the record number of people participating in apprenticeships in our country, will the Minister outline what steps the Government have taken to encourage more small businesses to offer apprenticeships?

Robert Halfon: My hon. Friend, who is a champion of apprenticeships in his area, will be pleased to know that, under the plans for the new apprenticeship levy, small businesses that hire 16 to 18-year-olds as apprentices will pay only 10% of the training costs. Furthermore, they and the providers will each receive £1,000. That will encourage small businesses to hire more apprentices.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): I welcome the Minister to his place, and I welcome his commitment to social mobility, but is not the truth that he found this shambles—30% to 50% of apprenticeship funding is being cut for our most disadvantaged 16 to 18-year-olds—in the welcome pack in his in-tray? He knows that it is a shambles. Nearly a month ago, he and I spoke here to a full house of sector leaders and heard it from them. On the same day, the Prime Minister was caught on the hop when she said that she did not recognise the figures, and the chief executive of the Institute of the Motor Industry said that it was a looming car crash. With no proper impact assessment of these cuts, and with the Government’s credibility on the line, why one month later has the Minister still no solutions to these funding cuts?

Robert Halfon: I notice that the shadow Minister—I have great respect for him and am pleased to face him across the Dispatch Box—called his campaign “Save our apprenticeships”. We have been saving 2.5 million people on apprenticeships over the past five years. In 2014-15, in his own constituency, he had 1,040 apprenticeship starts, 218 under-19 apprenticeship starts and 10,500 people participating in further education. If that is not saving apprentices, I do not know what is. As I have said, the apprentice funding will be doubled to £2.5 billion. He is ignoring the increase in the STEM uplifts, the extra money spent on new apprenticeship standards and the £1,000 going to every employer and every provider when they hire a 16 to 18-year-old.

**Educational Provision: Rural Areas**

6. Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What assessment her Department has made of the adequacy of educational provision in rural areas.

The Minister for Schools (Mr Nick Gibb): Local authorities are responsible for assessing educational need in their areas, and they have a statutory duty to ensure that there are sufficient school places, including in rural areas. Nearly 600,000 additional school places were created between May 2010 and May 2015, with many more delivered since then and in the pipeline. The Government have committed a further £7 billion for school places, which, along with our investment in 500 new free schools, we expect to deliver another 600,000 new school places by 2021.

Chris Davies: Very sadly, Builth Wells and Llandrindod high schools in Radnorshire are under threat of closure. What more can my hon. Friend do to ensure that we keep educational parity across rural areas, so that pupils have access to superb local schools no matter where they live?

Mr Gibb: In May, the Government set out a package of measures to secure the continued success and sustainability of rural schools in England, including a £10 million fund for expert support to help rural schools through the academy conversion process and a new double lock to sit alongside the existing presumption against the closure of rural schools. By contrast, in Labour-run Wales, with a Liberal Democrat Education Minister, there is no presumption against the closure of rural schools.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Schools in urban areas face challenges, too, with many reporting huge difficulties in retaining teachers. Today, the Education Policy Institute revealed that one in five teachers in England is working more than 60 hours a week. What priority is the Minister giving to analysing why schools are finding it so difficult to retain teachers and what impact workload has on that?

Mr Gibb: The EPI report is based on a 2013 OECD teaching and learning international survey. In response, in 2014, the previous Secretary of State announced the workload challenge—there were 44,000 responses to that—which highlighted issues such as dialogic marking and data collection. We set up review groups to look at that, and they have reported. We have accepted their recommendations, and now we are acting on those recommendations to ease the burden of workload on teachers in our schools. We are acting, and we have acted.
Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I welcome the Minister’s comments today about rural schools, and I have a large preponderance of rural schools in my constituency. However, the fact is that Taunton Deane receives £2,000 less per pupil on average than the national average. I know that the Secretary of State and the Minister are working hard in the best interests of our young people, our teachers and our governors, but can he please confirm that due consideration will be given to righting the funding disparity between our schools and our pupils?

Mr Gibb: We have protected the core schools budget in real terms, but the system for distributing those funds, as my hon. Friend pointed out, is outdated, inefficient and unfair. That is why we consulted on the principles and the building blocks of the formula in the spring of this year. That will include sparsity as a concept, and also a fixed sum, which of course helps small schools. We will issue our detailed proposals on the design and impact of the formula for consultation in the autumn.

Tristram Hunt (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab): The key to successful educational provision in rural areas is the quality of teaching. The Labour party has long believed in having qualified teachers in our schools. One area of cross-party agreement in the last Parliament was on having a Royal College of Teaching. Will the Minister update the House on how far the Government have enacted that?

Mr Gibb: There is a Royal College of Teaching. We are meeting the initial funding costs of the Royal College of Teaching, and it is going to be a great success. I should point out that 95% of all teachers in our system have qualified teacher status and that 93% of all teachers in academies have QTS.

Languages Education

7. David Mackintosh (Northampton South) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase the uptake of languages. [906520]

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening): The inclusion of a language in the EBacc increased the numbers of students studying at least one language at GCSE between 2010 and 2015, and the Government’s ambition is that more pupils in mainstream secondary schools enter the EBacc subjects at GCSE.

Mr Speaker: Order. I had thought that the Secretary of State was seeking to group this question with Question 12, from the hon. Member for Banbury, whom we do not wish arbitrarily to exclude from our deliberations.

Justine Greening: Indeed I am, Mr Speaker. Well spotted.

12. Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase the uptake of languages. [906527]

David Mackintosh: Does my right hon. Friend agree that new schools such as Northampton International Academy, where I am the chair of governors, are crucial to secure the mix of education options that this country needs, with a focus on languages?

Justine Greening: Absolutely. Indeed, new schools such as Northampton International Academy, which has an academic curriculum with a language specialism and also links to schools in other countries, are the sorts of schools that can really play a key role in ensuring that there are strong options for children on languages.

Mr Speaker: I call Victoria Prentis.

Victoria Prentis: Thank you, Mr Speaker—I cannot tell you how grateful I am not to be excluded this afternoon. Given the importance of China in the global marketplace today, not least to my constituents who work in Bicester shopping village, does my right hon. Friend agree that our children should be taught Chinese in schools?

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend is quite right that having more young people learning Chinese is important for the UK’s place in the world; indeed, many employers are looking for more staff who are able to speak Mandarin Chinese. This September, we launched a £10 million Mandarin excellence programme, and hundreds of pupils in England have started intensive lessons in Chinese. By 2020, 5,000 pupils will be working towards a high level of fluency in Mandarin Chinese.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that rigorous teaching of English grammar to all our pupils, not just the grammar school elite, would not only increase the uptake of foreign languages in schools, but help them to achieve success in those foreign languages?

Justine Greening: I do agree with the hon. Gentleman. He will be aware that, alongside numeracy, a focus on literacy and language has been a core part of how we have improved standards in schools over the past six years.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): One of the most widely spoken languages in the United Kingdom is Punjabi. What steps are the Government taking to encourage students to study that language, particularly in the light of Brexit, after which our trade with India and Pakistan will become even more important?

Justine Greening: We are continuing with our community language GCSEs and A-levels. As the hon. Gentleman points out, it has never been more important for young people coming out of our education system to be successful not only in our own country, but in a global world.

Design and Technology

8. Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): If she will set out her response to the letter to her of July 2016 from hon. Members on the inclusion of design and technology in the EBacc. [906521]

The Minister for Schools (Mr Nick Gibb): As I said in my letter to my hon. Friend, the Government believe that all students should study a broad and balanced curriculum. Design and technology is an important and valued subject, which is why we are doing a huge amount to promote the importance of D and T, and why we have reformed and improved the curriculum,
working with the James Dyson Foundation and other experts to raise the quality and rigour of the design and technology GCSE. D and T is a very popular GCSE choice, with 185,000 entries this year.

Michelle Donelan: We have an annual shortage of 69,000 trained engineers in the UK, with only 6% of that workforce being female. Those shortages are much more severe than in computer science. As the Minister has pointed out, the new design and technology GCSE has the same academic rigour as the other subjects in the EBacc, so will he explain to the House why he felt that computer science was more worthy of EBacc status than design and technology?

Mr Gibb: The EBacc is about a small number of core academic subjects, focused on those subjects that keep options open. I am confident that the new, reformed design and technology GCSE will lead to even more young people wanting to take this qualification in future years, once the new curriculum is in place. However, our policy objective is for more students, particularly those taking design and technology, to study the traditional sciences.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the Minister take seriously the role of technical education in our schools? Design and technology has been peripheralised in the opinion of many people. On the day that the Royal Greenwich University Technical College is to close, with university technical colleges closing up and down the country, there is something rotten at the heart of Government policy.

Mr Gibb: No. We have engaged in a huge reform to improve the quality of technical qualifications. That is what the Alison Wolf review did in 2011, by removing from performance tables the qualifications for which students were entered but that were not valued in the workplace. Technical qualifications taken by young people now have real value and provide proper jobs. We have also improved the quality of the apprenticeship scheme, which the Minister of State, Department for Education, my right hon. Friend, the Member for Harlow (Robert Halfon), talked about earlier.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): Will the Minister join me in welcoming UTC Oxfordshire, based in Didcot in my constituency, which opened this time last year. In fact, it was opened by Brian Cox, no less. Thanks to this Government, children across Oxfordshire can now enjoy a first-class technical education, supported by companies such as BMW Mini, the United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority and RM Education. I hope he will find time to visit it in the coming months.

Mr Gibb: I would welcome the opportunity to visit my right hon. Friend’s UTC. The UTC programme is another example of how, with our academies programme and our free schools programme, we are providing diverse types of specific and specialist education for every child in this country.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): The Minister will recall from the meeting he held with me and some excellent headteachers in Slough to discuss our teacher shortage problem that two outstanding grammar schools with excellent GCSE and A-level results are not meeting his demands on EBacc levels because they have chosen, confidently, to provide subjects—such as design and technology, art and design, and drama—they felt their students would benefit from and needed. Why cannot schools without such confidence make choices for the future of their pupils, rather than to satisfy the Minister?

Mr Gibb: It is not to satisfy the Minister; it is to ensure that young people have the widest possible opportunities available to them. We kept the EBacc combination of core academic GCSEs small enough, at either seven or eight, to allow sufficient time in the curriculum for pupils to study those subjects that interest them. That is why I have resisted calls for more subjects to be added to the EBacc.

Technical Education

9. Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): What progress the Government have made on raising the quality of technical education. [906522]

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Robert Halfon): We are transforming and reforming the technical qualifications available in schools and colleges, as my hon. Friend the Minister for Schools just said, to ensure that they are challenging and rigorous. We are creating clear technical education routes at the highest skill levels and will boost the capacity to deliver them through national colleges and institutes of technology in degree and higher apprenticeships. The post-16 skills plan that we published in July outlines the most radical reform of post-16 education in almost 70 years, by creating a high-quality technical track.

Helen Whately: I welcome the commitment of the Secretary of State and the Minister to technical education, alongside more academic routes. Employers in Faversham are keen to support young people in apprenticeships, but they have told me that apprenticeships need to be more flexible and less bureaucratic, so will the Minister involve such employers as he develops the technical education system?

Robert Halfon: My hon. Friend is exactly right. Technical education clearly needs to be aligned better with business needs. We are building on the apprenticeships reforms, whereby employers are designing the new apprenticeship standards to meet their needs, by giving employers a strong role in setting the standards across the 15 technical routes. They will advise on the knowledge, skills and behaviours that are needed, so that technical education has value for employers and learners alike, and is responsive to the requirements of the economy and employers.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): BTECs are challenging and rigorous. It would be quite concerning if we had an over-focus on technical education, pure and simple, without maintaining a strong applied route through BTECs. Will the Minister give us a commitment about the future of BTECs?

Robert Halfon: Clearly, we had to reform technical education, because there were far too many qualifications. There were over 13,000 qualifications, and engineering had something like 500. We are looking to offer students
a technical pathway if that is what they choose, and we will look at the best qualifications for those technical pathways.

Adoption

10. Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to improve support for adopted families. [906523]

13. Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to improve support for adopted families. [906528]

The Minister for Vulnerable Children and Families (Edward Timpson): More than 9,000 families in England have received bespoke therapeutic support via the adoption support fund that we set up just 17 months ago. Such support is often crucial in making a placement a long-term success. We are improving support in schools by extending access to virtual school heads and designated teachers, and we are developing new care pathways to meet the mental health needs of adopted children. The establishment of regional adoption agencies and the £14-million practice and improvement fund were designed to bring about better support for adoptive families.

Nusrat Ghani: At a recent inspection, the performance of East Sussex County Council’s adoption service was rated by Ofsted as outstanding. What does the Department do to ensure that best practice is shared, so that local authorities that are identified as requiring improvement learn from those that are providing an outstanding service?

Edward Timpson: First, I congratulate East Sussex County Council on its Ofsted rating. I agree that we want others to learn from the best. The development of regional adoption agencies will see local authorities and voluntary adoption agencies working side by side to deliver excellent adoption services everywhere, with a strong focus on evidencing what actually works. We are setting up the aptly titled What Works centre for children’s social care, which will disseminate and promote best practice across the country.

Mr Burrowes: I recognise the great role the Government and the Minister have played in championing and supporting adoption, so he will share my concern at the statistics his Department released on 29 September, which show a reduction for the second year running in the number of children being placed for adoption and being adopted. What is the main reason for those figures, and what action are the Government taking to turn them around?

Edward Timpson: It is worth remembering that there were 4,690 adoptions in 2015-16—an increase of 35% on 2011-12. The latest figures, to which my hon. Friend refers, are due in large part to over-responses to the Re B-S judgment in 2013. They are disappointing figures. That is why, through the Children and Social Work Bill, we are amending legislation to improve the way decisions about long-term care options are taken, so that adoption is always pursued when it is in a child’s best interests. The Government’s adoption strategy, which we published in March, sets out plans to redesign the whole adoption system to ensure that we have the foundations in place to build a lasting change that benefits children.

Community Languages

11. Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): What progress she has made on maintaining the availability of GCSE and A-level qualifications in community languages. [906526]

The Minister for Schools (Mr Nick Gibb): After several months of negotiations, we have secured the exam boards’ commitment to continue to provide all but one of the existing language qualifications at GCSE and A-level. I place on record my thanks to Rod Bristow of Pearson and Andrew Hall of AQA for their help and support in securing a long-term future for those important qualifications. It is right that we have a range of language qualifications available, reflecting the diversity and dynamism of today’s Britain.

Bob Blackman: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his answer and on the negotiations that have taken place.

Every year, thousands of young people from the age of five onwards begin learning Gujarati, Urdu or Punjabi, expecting it to lead to a long-term qualification. What steps can my hon. Friend take to make sure that those qualifications are secure not just for an interim period but in the long term, and that the teaching staff are available to provide that education?

Mr Gibb: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for his work in helping to secure those qualifications, particularly in Gujarati, working with the Consortium of Gujarati Schools. I am pleased that we have secured the continuation of qualifications in community languages. There will be no gap in provision—the existing qualifications will continue to be offered until 2018, when the new qualifications are introduced. We continue to support the recruitment of high-quality language teachers, including by offering bursaries of up to £25,000. There are also many successful and long-standing Saturday schools, which help to ensure that culture and languages continue to be taught.

Teachers’ Morale

14. Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): What assessment she has made of morale in the teaching profession. [906529]

The Minister for Schools (Mr Nick Gibb): We want motivated, enthusiastic teachers in our schools, and the latest OECD teaching and learning international survey reported that 82% of the teachers surveyed in England agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with their job. We recognise the challenges for the profession, however, such as unnecessary workload, which we continue to address. The latest official statistics show that teacher retention rates one year after qualification have remained stable at around 90% for 20 years. In 2010, 70% of teachers were still teaching five years later, and more than 60% of teachers remained in the classroom 10 years after qualifying.
Christian Matheson: I am grateful for that answer, but is it not the case that 40% of teachers leave within the first five years, and why is that?

Mr Gibb: The figures are not dissimilar to those in other professions. We realise that there are workload challenges, which was why we set up the workload challenge in 2014. There were 44,000 responses, which we analysed carefully. Three top issues were raised: dialogic deep marking, data collection and the preparation of lessons. We addressed all three issues by setting up three working parties, led and staffed by experienced teachers and headteachers. They reported and made recommendations, which we accepted, and action has now been taken.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): Thousands of EU nationals across the UK play key roles in children’s education, be it as classroom assistants, teachers, janitors or cleaners. We cannot overestimate the importance of those roles in children’s education, be it as classroom assistants, teachers, janitors or cleaners. We cannot overestimate the importance of those roles in children’s education, be it as classroom assistants, teachers, janitors or cleaners.

Mr Gibb: The Prime Minister has made it very clear that we expect all EU nationals resident in the UK to remain here, but of course that depends on reciprocal arrangements for British citizens living in other EU countries.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): Despite the Minister’s earlier response, the Education Policy Institute has shown how excessive hours are driving record numbers of teachers from the profession, including friends and former colleagues of mine. NASUWT has found that half of teachers have been to see a doctor in the past year due to work-related illness, and one in 10 have been prescribed antidepressants. We know that the Minister is on the record as not valuing one in 10 who have been prescribed antidepressants. We know that the Minister is on the record as not valuing one in 10 who have been prescribed antidepressants.

Mr Gibb: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to the Education shadow Front-Bench team. I understand the challenges of the teaching profession, and we are taking action. That is why we set up the workload challenge in 2014. The report published today by the Education Policy Institute is based on the 2013 TALIS. When that survey was published, we looked at it very carefully, which is why we conducted the survey that we did and are taking action. The key thing is that 1.4 million more children are in good or outstanding schools today than there were in 2010. There are now 1.4 million more children in good or outstanding schools today than there were in 2010.

Mr Speaker: There is some sort of screed written in front of the Minister of State. He may find it profitable for himself and others to deposit it in the Library, where colleagues can consult it if they wish in the long winter evenings that lie ahead.
Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I would like to come back to a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester Central (Lucy Powell). The fairer early years funding plan has created a ticking time bomb for nurseries. Figures revealed by the Secretary of State’s own Department show that 25% of local authorities across the country will lose out financially. I am afraid that her earlier answer will do nothing to reassure the National Association of Head Teachers, which believes that that will lead to the closure of hundreds of nurseries. Will she today commit to a funding pledge for nurseries for provision for after the first two years, so that the pledge of 30 hours of free childcare will be honoured for all?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Caroline Dinenage): I would like to take this opportunity to welcome the hon. Lady to her place on the Opposition Front Bench. I can reassure her that the funding formula that we have consulted on will make funding fairer, more transparent and more sustainable. Indeed, she is misinformed: our proposals mean that 88% of local authorities and their providers can expect to see their funding rates increase.

T5. [906484] Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): As part of local democracy week, I visited two excellent primary schools, Hillcross and The Priory, in my constituency this morning. As I left, the headteacher of one of them asked me about the primary school assessment framework. Can the Minister confirm to the House how long he expects the transitional arrangements to be in place?

The Minister for Schools (Mr Nick Gibb): We will be announcing the response to the primary assessment arrangements shortly. It was important that we raised academic standards in our primary schools, and that is why we had a new curriculum introduced by 2014, after two or three years of preparation and consultation. We are raising standards in reading—there are now 147,000 more six-year-olds reading more effectively than they otherwise would be—and we are raising academic standards in maths and in grammar, punctuation and spelling. That is very important, and we will make further announcements about the details of the assessment soon.

T2. [906481] Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): In the Higher Education and Research Bill, the Government will allow universities simply to shut down if they fail in the HE marketplace, as though their role in local communities was a matter of no significance or concern to Government. That takes no account of the impact that closures will have on students and lecturers or the businesses and communities around them. Will the Government think again?

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): The Higher Education and Research Bill will make student protection plans mandatory for the first time, putting in place systematic protection for students, which at present is very patchy and partial across our higher education system.

T7. [906487] Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): How is our proper and welcome focus on phonics progressing?

Mr Gibb: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for that question; it is progressing extremely well. In 2012, 58% of six-year-olds passed the check. This year, 81% passed the check. That is a huge improvement in the quality of the teaching of reading in our primary schools.

T4. [906483] Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Can the Secretary of State explain how allowing schools to select all their pupils by religion, abolishing the 50% cap, will in any way help to bring communities together?

Justine Greening: The current rule is generally inoperative for many free schools when they begin, because they are not over-subscribed, and it only kicks in if they are. We are proposing to put in place much stronger, more effective controls to ensure that faith schools that are opening will be community schools. I would very much encourage the hon. Gentleman to read the consultation document, which sets out proposals, including that those schools should demonstrate clear parental demand from parents of other faiths or no faith and that they should twin with primary schools and other schools.

T8. [906488] Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): New engineering and infrastructure projects in the south-west mean that skilled workers are in great demand—a fact that I hope will help those at GKN in Yeovil who are sadly grappling with its potential closure, as announced on Friday. Will my right hon. Friend meet me to discuss ways we can boost skills development and preserve and enhance the highly valued skills base we have?

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Robert Halfon): I am always pleased to meet my hon. Friend, who is a champion of skills in his constituency. He will know that people in Somerset will benefit from the increased number of apprenticeships and the 15 new high-quality technical routes, which he has heard about already this afternoon. The new National College for Nuclear, opening in 2017, will have a base in Somerset, supporting the local workforce to develop their skills and build capacity for the Hinkley Point C nuclear plant. He will also know that there have been 1,160 apprentice starts in his constituency over the past year, with 350 for the under-19s, showing the skills base in his constituency.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State has spoken about social mobility. Where is the evidence, from this country or other parts of the world, that bringing back selection at 11 will increase social mobility? I think the evidence shows the opposite. May I urge her once again to think again about this plan to extend grammar schools and instead work together to raise standards for all children in all our schools?

Justine Greening: Of course, the two objectives are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, our school reforms will continue, and they have already seen the best part of 1.5 million children now in good or outstanding schools who were not in 2010. We see attainment driven through grammar schools in places such as Northern Ireland. It
is just wrong simply to set on one side schools that are closing the attainment gap for children on free school meals and not look at how we can make that option available to more parents and more children.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I want to call several more colleagues in these exchanges.

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): On mandarin, I know my hon. Friend will be impressed of the work of St Catherine’s College’s Confucius school and the Eastbourne District Chinese Association. It is clearly important to promote language learning at home. I am a French teacher by profession. Can my hon. Friend assure me that we will continue to value opportunities for British students to study abroad?

Mr Gibb: On the last point, yes. We continue to value travel abroad. Learning a language is key to being able to travel and work abroad, and that is what the Mandarin Excellence Programme is all about. We hope 5,000 students will be fluent in Mandarin, reaching levels of HSK4 and HSK5, which go beyond A-level. We want more young people to take languages in our schools—including the language my hon. Friend teaches—following the fall in the numbers taking GCSEs thanks to the Labour party.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): Today is World Mental Health Day. The Government acknowledge there has been an increase in the number of young people affected by anxiety, depression and other mental health conditions, yet so much more could and should be done to prevent them. When will the Secretary of State bring forward statutory compulsory and high-quality personal, social, health and economic education in every single school, so that we can equip the next generation with the skills and confidence to get help early on?

Justine Greening: The hon. Lady is right to raise the issue of mental health. In September, we announced a package to tackle bullying in schools, which we know is one of the drivers of mental health issues. She is right to raise the broader issue. We are looking at how we continue to ensure that PSHE works effectively in schools, and we are working with the NHS.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that our young people need a mixture of routes by which they can go on to succeed, and that that will continue to underpin Government policy moving forward?

Justine Greening: Yes, I very strongly agree with my hon. Friend. As I said earlier, we are reforming the academic route for many of our young people. However, for the majority who are more interested in a technical route in education post-16, it is vital that we now bring together different policy areas—apprenticeships, university technical colleges and the work of further education colleges up and down the country—to ensure they deliver for them.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): The leaked small schools task force report shows that the Department ignored advice to continue funding small schools to provide universal infant free school meals. This will affect 566 children in the schools represented by the Education Front-Bench team and thousands more children represented by those on the Government Back Benches. Will the Minister today commit to reverse this short-sighted cut and ensure that small schools have adequate funding to feed their infant children free school meals?

Mr Gibb: I do not quite understand what the hon. Lady is talking about. We are funding free school meals for infant schools at £2.30 a head. On funding rural schools, we are consulting on a formula that will protect rural schools for the long term.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The Minister was just attacked for removing the cap on faith schools. The implication was that they do not promote cohesion. Is it not a nonsense to suggest that our wonderful Anglican and Catholic schools are not broad-based and do not promote cohesion? Above all, they have good academic standards. The unacknowledged point of the cap was to stop 100% Muslim schools. It was simply not effective and was therefore useless, so the Minister was right to do away with it.

Justine Greening: I agree with my hon. Friend—he is right. We should reflect on the fact that about a third of our schools are faith schools. Many of our children will have gone to those schools. They have an ethos and a level of academic attainment that we are trying to achieve more broadly across the whole system.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): I commend the Secretary of State for announcing, or perhaps forcing, the U-turn on the nasty policy of employers naming foreign employees. Will she now give us another U-turn and announce that schools do not need to ask parents to provide birth certificates, thus potentially turning schools into immigration offices?

Justine Greening: This is about making sure we have the right data and evidence to develop strong policy. That is a sensible approach, but it is important we respond to the concerns of schools that see additional numbers of pupils related to migration. We need to have a better sense of the stresses and strains, so that we can target resourcing effectively.

Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): True childcare costs in Twickenham are double the current Government funding formula. Will the Minister meet me to share how we can avert a crisis and ensure that every three and four-year-old in Twickenham will be able to get 30 hours of free childcare?

Caroline Dinenage: We recognise that the costs of providing childcare vary enormously across different areas of the country. That is why we have just completed an early years national funding formula consultation, which proposes an area cost adjustment to reflect cost differentials in both staff and premises. Some 88% of
areas will see an increase and the hourly rate for Richmond Borough will rise significantly to £5.69 an hour. I will of course meet my hon. Friend to discuss this.

**Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab) rose—[Interruption.]**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. Shrieking from a sedentary position is very unfair on the Member who is trying to secure a hearing from the House. Let us hear Karin Smyth.

**Karin Smyth:** Thank you, Mr Speaker. Following the report by the Public Accounts Committee on entitlement to free early years education and childcare and a Westminster Hall debate on the subject that I initiated in July, the then Minister promised me that the Department was due to publish the early years workforce strategy document, addressing the shortfall in qualified staff to deliver the 30 hours of free childcare. What progress has been made?

**Caroline Dinenage:** The hon. Lady asks an important question. I am clear that we need to help employers to attract, retain and develop their staff to the very highest possible quality of early years provision. The workforce strategy will be published very shortly.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** Order. I am sorry to disappoint colleagues, but as usual demand has exceeded supply.
Mr Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con) (Urgent Question): To ask the Home Secretary for a statement on the Calais Jungle in the light of its imminent demolition and the urgent need to provide safety for children who have a family link in the United Kingdom or in whose best interests it is to be here.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): Today I met my counterpart, Bernard Cazeneuve, and we agreed that we have a moral duty to safeguard the welfare of unaccompanied refugee children. We both take our humanitarian responsibilities seriously. The UK Government have made clear their commitment to resettle vulnerable children under the Immigration Act 2016 and ensure that those with links to the UK are brought here using the Dublin regulation.

The primary responsibility for unaccompanied children in France, including those in the Calais camp, lies with the French authorities. The UK Government have no jurisdiction to operate on French territory and the UK can contribute only in ways agreed with the French authorities and in compliance with French and EU law. The UK has made significant progress in speeding up the Dublin process. We have established a permanent official-level contact group, and we have seconded UK experts to the French Government.

Part of the role is to assist co-ordinating efforts on the ground to identify children. Since the beginning of 2016 more than 80 unaccompanied children have been accepted for transfer to the UK from France under the Dublin regulation, nearly all of whom have now arrived in the UK.

Within those very real constraints, we continue to work with the French Government and partner organisations to speed up mechanisms to identify, assess and transfer unaccompanied refugee children to the UK where that is in their best interests. While the decision on the dismantling of the Calais camp and the timing of the operation is a matter for the French Government, I have made it crystal clear to the French Interior Minister on numerous occasions, including at our meeting today, that our priority must be to ensure the safety and security of children during any camp clearance.

We have made good progress today, but there is much more work to do. To that end, I emphasised to Mr Cazeneuve that we should transfer from the camp as many minors as possible eligible under the Dublin regulation before clearance commences, with the remainder coming over within the next few days of the operation. I also outlined my views that those children eligible under the Dubs amendment to the Immigration Act 2016 must be looked after in safe facilities where their best interests are properly considered. The UK Government stand ready to help to fund such facilities and provide the resourcing to aid the decision making. I made it clear today in my meeting with Mr Cazeneuve that we should particularly prioritise those under the age of 12, because they are the most vulnerable. The UK remains committed to upholding our humanitarian responsibilities on protecting minors and those most vulnerable.

Mr Burrowes: With the Calais Jungle earmarked for demolition next week, what is being done to provide safety and refuge for children for whom we have a legal and moral duty of care? On the last count conducted by Citizens UK/Safe Passage UK, 178 children were eligible for sanctuary in the UK under the Dublin criteria and 212 under the Dubs best interests amendment. The Red Cross has told me today that “the Home Office’s energy in the last few weeks has been significant and recognises the scale of the challenge.”

However, that energy is not shared by the French authorities, which do not provide appointments, interpreters or resources to make transfers in the “days” that the Home Office wants rather than the “weeks” or the “months”.

Last month, the Home Secretary told the Home Affairs Committee that she would get over to the UK as soon as possible all the children for whom we have a legal obligation, and she has confirmed today that she wants as many of them as possible over here before demolition. Last week, she said that “compassion does not stop at the border”, and she has been reported as saying today that the first 100 child refugees are coming to the UK “within weeks”.

Can the Home Secretary provide the assurance today that all children eligible for transfer to the UK will be in a place of safety before the demolition starts? The French accommodation centres are inadequate for children. When it comes to transportation, only 12 got on the bus to the centres on Thursday, and the next bus is not until tomorrow. The French Red Cross, however, has pledged to provide accommodation in one place for all children awaiting reunion with UK families. Will the Home Secretary ensure in her discussions with her French counterparts over the coming days that that happens before the demolition starts? Will the Government, with France, create a designated children’s centre sufficient for all children with relocation claims, whether under the Dubs amendment or Dublin arrangements, rather than risk dispersal and exploitation?

The Red Cross’s report—aftently named “No place for children”, as many who have visited the Calais jungle would testify—highlighted this weekend the humanitarian and bureaucratic nightmare. The “bureaucratic” aspect is particularly frustrating. No clear process has yet been established by the Home Office or France to identify, assess and relocate UK lone children whose best interests under the Dubs amendment are to be in the UK.

Will the Government use funds, whether they be from the Department for International Development or wherever, to establish an appropriately mandated organisation with the authority from France and the UK to identify all minors eligible for transfer and to assist in the progress of their cases, whether it be through investigating claims through family links under the Dublin arrangements or the Dubs best interests criteria? Finally, does the Home Secretary acknowledge that until we have those answers, that plan for the safety of those vulnerable Calais children will risk the Prime Minister’s words last week on the importance of standing up for the weak being just that—words?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for raising this matter, giving me the opportunity to set out what the Government are doing. I particularly appreciate his comments about the urgency of this matter,
and I share his view on that, as does everybody in this House. I attended a meeting with my French counterpart for nearly two hours today. He had eight or nine people with him, as did I. It is fair to say that the bureaucratic element will now be dealt with with the sort of urgency that we want to see.

On ensuring that there is access to a children’s centre when the clearances take place, I certainly share my hon. Friend’s view that it is essential to ensure that those children are kept safe during any clearances, and I have made that point to the French Minister.

The children who can be dealt with under the Dublin arrangements are not, by any means, all the children we want to take, but it is part 1 of where we want to help. We have been pressing for a list. I appreciate that Citizens UK and other non-governmental organisations have a list, but for the Dublin arrangements to work, the children have to come through the host country. We believe that the French will give that to us this week. My hon. Friend should be in no doubt that we will move with all urgency—a matter of days or a week at the most—in order to deliver on that commitment when we get it.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): In January this year, I visited the Calais Jungle refugee camp, and I remind Members that words cannot convey the horror of the conditions there. People are sleeping under canvas in sub-zero temperatures; there is squalor, a lack of sanitation, violence, and threats of sexual assault. Nobody should have to be in those conditions for a minute longer than necessary, and that is particularly true for children.

Will the Home Secretary reassure us that these children, who either have a legal right to come to the UK or whose “best interests” in the words of the Dubs amendment, would be served by that, will not be scattered to all parts of France? Will these children be in one place in a designated children’s centre?

I put it to the Home Secretary that, with her misconceived proposal to make companies keep lists of foreign workers, she has already revealed that she is out of touch with this country’s better instincts. For those children in those desperate conditions, will she step up and do what people all over the country want us to do, which is to fulfil our moral responsibilities? We need fewer words and more action.

Amber Rudd: I can reassure the hon. Lady that the list from the French Government that will enable us to get the children who belong here safely back to this country. I am absolutely committed to ensuring that the safety of children is put first. I share her views about the horror for the children living there. It is because we are so committed to protecting those children that we are making them a priority in our arrangements with the French, and in our assistance, which the French have asked for, in clearing their camps. Be in no doubt that the French are committed to ensuring that they clear those camps. They have asked us for assistance, and we will be giving it to them in the form of taking children who have the right to be here, as I set out to my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes), and in the form of money, process and staff. No stone will be unturned in this Government’s assistance of the French in ensuring that we help those children come to this country when they should.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I am delighted that the Home Secretary is taking this problem so seriously, and that she is working well with her counterpart Bernard Cazeneuve in trying to ensure that those children are safe, and that the problem of the Calais refugee camp is solved. However, I am worried about the criminal gangs that are operating in the area and exploiting vulnerable people. I understand that, last year, the UK and French authorities co-operated very well, and that some 28 criminal gangs were disrupted. Will the Home Secretary tell us what progress she and the French authorities have had this year in bringing those criminal gangs and their actions to a full stop?

Amber Rudd: My right hon. Friend rightly draws attention to the real villains of the camp, namely the criminal gangs who prey on the most vulnerable. It is their violent intentions towards the people who are in the camps that could be most damaging and disruptive for everybody, not just for the children but for all people in the camps. I am in close conversations with our French counterparts to ensure that they do what they can to disrupt any crime, in order that we have the safe dismantling of the camps.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I welcome the Home Secretary’s acceptance that there is a moral duty to help those children, but of course it is also a legal duty, which exists not just because of the Dublin convention, but because of the Dubs amendment passed by the House. It is clear that there is widespread concern on both sides of the House about the current lack of transparency from the Government in relation to those legal duties. Given the lack of meaningful action to date in bringing those unaccompanied minors to the UK, does the Home Secretary agree that it would be a good idea for the Government to commit to publishing a regular update on numbers and progress? Will she commit to publishing a fortnightly update?

Will the Home Secretary tell us how many children the United Kingdom is prepared to take in during the next week? We would like to hear numbers. We hear that there are up to 400 unaccompanied children in the camp—[Interruption.] I am being heckled, with an hon. Member asking how many Scotland will take. Scotland has already taken more than a proportionate share of refugees who have come to this country, and we stand ready to take as many as we can, but unfortunately we have to wait for the UK Government to act. That is what the urgent question from the hon. Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr Burrowes) is about.

I want to raise one final issue. I visited the camp in Calais at Easter with some of my Scottish National party colleagues and members of the Scottish Refugee Council. We heard that the last time the southern part of the camp was demolished, that happened with no warning. People came out of their tents in the middle of the night and what few belongings they had were crushed. Will the Home Secretary undertake to speak to the French Government to ensure that that sort of inhumanity does not occur again in relation not only to children, but to adults?
Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. and learned Lady for her question. She asked about the numbers under the Dubs amendment, which was agreed in May, and I can tell her that we have taken more than 50 in process. They are largely from Greece, because that was the area deemed to have the highest differential in terms of the children’s vulnerability compared with the UK. We are now focused much more on trying to get these children from the Calais camps, and for the past three weeks the French have been working with us on identifying them.

The hon. and learned Lady asked for details about numbers and plans for bringing children to the UK. I would say to her and to the House in all honesty and humility that we have to be careful about how much information we share publicly about those numbers and plans, because it is not always in the best interests of the children’s vulnerability compared with the UK. We are now focused much more on trying to get these children from the Calais camps, and for the past three weeks the French have been working with us on identifying them.

Amber Rudd: I admire the right hon. Lady’s tenacity in highlighting this issue. I am always pleased to speak to her about it, because I share her views about how important it is. On the numbers and bureaucracy, part of the purpose of meeting Bernard Cazeneuve was indeed to make that bridge much closer so that our officials can deliver with the urgency that she expects and which I hope to achieve. We have asked the French Government to confirm the number being given by Citizens UK and they tell us that they will do that within the next few days. Once they have done so, there will be no hesitation in acting on that as soon as possible.

Mr James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): There can be no doubting the Home Secretary’s compassion or her determination to do something about this appalling problem for up to 400 children who have a perfect right to come here. I congratulate the Government on doing more this year than last year, as the numbers have gone up significantly. None the less, this is a major crisis, and the camp will be cleared within days. It appears that there has been huge bureaucratic confusion in France, and dockets have been lost. Apparently, there are only four French officials in the camp, which is poor. It is time for the British Government to set up a taskforce, with British officials working with French officials, which should go to the camp, sort out these people, find out who they are, and bring them back.

Amber Rudd: We have certainly noticed a significant uplift in the effort, people, time and professional commitment that the French are willing to put in. Because they are moving closer to clearing the camps, they are now very keen to work with us and help us to identify the children whom we can legally take over, and my hon. Friend should be in no doubt that we are working closely with them to ensure that we can do that with all possible speed.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The Home Secretary has estimated that there are between 600 and 900 unaccompanied children in the camp, and has said that if the United Kingdom were to take 300, that would be “a really good result”. May I just suggest that for the 600 who are left alone and cold in Calais, it will not be “a really good result”? The children who have come here so far have done so mainly as a result of Citizens UK’s safe passage programme, in the absence of any system to implement Dublin in Calais. Will the Home Secretary promise the House that she will step up the efforts? Will she give a number that is credible and also massively ambitious, given the changing circumstances? Will she ensure that, through bloody-minded determination, compassion and urgency, the Government act in line with this country’s values, and give those children sanctuary and refuge?

Amber Rudd: I share the hon. Gentleman’s views about the values of this country and the need to look after those children, but I hesitate to give a number, although I am often pressed to do so by various organisations and, indeed, by our French counterparts.

I think that the right way to deal with this is to identify the regulations under which we, as a Government and as a country, have said that the children should come here, and that means Dublin and Dubs. On Dublin, we are making good, fast progress. We expect to receive
Amber Rudd: The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that this is a French issue and a French responsibility: these people are in France. That is one of the reasons why it is sometimes hard for us to engage in the way that Members would like us to. The fact is that all European countries are now becoming much more aware of the need to have not so much clearer border controls as clearer assessments of who is coming in and their personal details. We will be moving towards that position throughout Europe, not just in the EU.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Past experience shows that even if the present so-called jungle is cleared, it will not be long before another one springs up, unless we do something to tackle the underlying reasons for so many people wanting to come to the United Kingdom. Will the Home Secretary tell us what is being done, with the French authorities, to tackle the underlying reasons for so many people not being satisfied with staying in France?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend raises an interesting point: if the camp is cleared, how do we know that a new one will not form immediately? That is what happened when the Sangatte camp was cleared. It was supposed to be the final clearance, but it was not, and a new camp formed. I am in conversation with my French counterparts to ensure that they take action to prevent that happening again, and I am sure that I will be able to fill my hon. Friend in when I have more information.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): With typical generosity, the British public and local authorities want to do something to help. The Home Secretary has made a personal commitment today to doing the right thing, and she is to be applauded for that, but what will happen if France does not meet its commitment to her over the next few days? Does she have a plan B?

Amber Rudd: I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that by the end of my two-hour meeting with Bernard Cazeneuve, we had arrived at a point at which we expect to reach an agreement. We have not reached one yet, but on the key subject of how the UK can contribute to the clearing of the camp, particularly in a way that supports the children, we have arrived at a point where we think we can reach agreement; I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will bear with me for a few more days, because I am confident that we will do so.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I welcome the Home Secretary’s remarks today. The people of Salisbury and south Wiltshire are certainly committed to seeing this through, and to seeing the right thing done. Does she agree that it is important for us to anticipate the widest possible range of needs in this cohort, especially in terms of educational and medical services, which are seen as particularly significant in Salisbury?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We talk about bringing over these children, who have a legal right to be here, and the communities receiving them want to help them, but these children often have particular needs, such as health needs, as a result of what they have been through, and it is essential to have an appropriate support package in place. That is one of the reasons why we want to be able to assess the children properly, so that the support packages can be well and truly in place when they come to the UK.
Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Home Secretary will be aware that there is a great deal of concern in the House today about the numbers. The voluntary sector has identified for her Department 387 children as being eligible to come here under Dublin III and the Dubs amendment, for example, but there is a wait of more than three months before many can even lodge an asylum claim in France; I do not think the hon. Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) is aware of that fact. This country is spending three times as much on building a wall to block those children from coming here as on trying to prevent them from being trafficked. Given the Secretary of State’s welcome commitment to getting things moving, will she reverse that ratio and put more money into the administration needed to process the papers, so that we can get those children out of that hellhole today?

Amber Rudd: I understand and share the hon. Lady’s genuine passion and commitment to this subject. However, it is not a lack of finances for dealing with the paperwork that has been slowing things up; this is a question of ensuring that the French engage with us, so that we can commit to getting the numbers through that we want. For instance, we have already referred to the 200 agreed under the Dublin agreement, and to the additional number under the Dubs amendment, but the French have begun to work with us on this only in the past three weeks. They are now focused on wanting us to take children from the camps, because they now want to clear the camps. I can confidently tell the hon. Lady that there will be a remarkable increase in our ability to take those children over and to process their claims, not because of money, but because of the political will to get it done.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): May I welcome the dismantling of the Calais Jungle, if indeed it does happen this time? May I also welcome the concern and compassion shown by the Home Secretary for the plight of these children? Does she agree that Kent, which is on the frontline, has about a quarter of the total number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in this country? Will she act to ensure that there is a fairer distribution of children, so that every local authority and every nation in this country does its bit to care for these children left in this appalling situation? Will she publish on a regular basis the numbers taken by each nation and each local authority in this country?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: this is happening in France. We are talking about French legislation and French authority territory, and we engage with the French authorities only as they allow us to do so. I can reassure him that, given that the French have decided to clear these camps, they are approaching our offers of help with a lot more enthusiasm and certainty of purpose. That means that we can deliver on what we all want to do, which is look after those children.

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome what the Home Secretary has said today. Rightly, the focus is on the appalling situation in Calais, but can she update the House on any progress on the Dubs amendment for children not in Calais? She mentioned the figure of 50, which sounds quite low. Can she update us on the work of her Department and the rest of Government, and also work with local government across the country, so that we can fulfil that goal of 3,000 unaccompanied children coming here?

Amber Rudd: We have focused on Greece and Italy, in terms of taking children according to the Dubs amendment. Our information told us that that was where the children were most vulnerable, and it was all about bringing the most vulnerable children to the UK. Of course, those children were always supposed to be refugees. The plan was always to ensure that they were Syrian refugees who needed to be transferred to the UK. We have been focusing on Greece and Italy, and we will continue to do so, but for a while, we will also make sure that, under that agreement, we take children from the Calais Jungle as well, and that work is ongoing.

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): I visited the Calais Jungle 10 days ago, and I welcome the commitment that the Home Secretary has made today to giving safe passage to these vulnerable children. People in the camp are genuinely frightened that it will be demolished with women and children still living in it. Does she share my concern about the fact that I met families who had made an asylum claim in France five months ago, but were still living in the camp because they have been told by the French authorities that there was nowhere else for them to go?
Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend brings disappointing news on that front. My experience of working with my French opposite number and his officials is that they are just as committed as we are to assisting in this matter. Their intention and aim is to dismantle the camp in the most humanitarian way possible. Clearly, it will be a challenge for them to do so, which is why we are offering financial and security support to ensure that it is done as effectively and as gently as possible.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I am a little concerned, because during this question and answer session there have been mixed messages. We heard initially that no stone would be left unturned in the process, but then there was hiding behind public disclosure restrictions, an unwillingness to commit to numbers and talk about waiting for the Government’s friends. The stark reality is that 80 unaccompanied children have been brought to the UK to date, and we are talking about nearly 400 being still in that camp, with a week to go to demolition. The Government must commit to numbers, confirm that they have the capability to bring in, in a short time, five times the number already brought in, and prove that they are working to identify those people and speak to their relatives in the UK.

Amber Rudd: I can only reassure the hon. Gentleman that the Government are doing that. We are working with the French. We are trying to identify the children who have a legal right to be here because of their family here. There is no lack of enthusiasm on our part to try to do that. There is no attempt to “hide behind” anything, as the hon. Gentleman put it. We are committed to doing what is in the best interests of the children with all speed and haste. We must be aware that there are people who wish those children evil, and we need to make sure that we protect them from the people who want to traffic them.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): My constituents do not understand why, if charities and non-governmental organisations can identify 387 unaccompanied children as having a legal right to be in the United Kingdom, the French authorities are unable to do that. Is the House to understand that, as the Home Secretary is trying to tell us, by the end of this week, the French Government will have confirmed to her the definitive number and individual names of those whom they believe are entitled to come to this country?

Amber Rudd: The answer to the first part of my hon. Friend’s question is that the children are not confirmed as qualifying under the Dublin agreement unless that is actually dealt with by the French Government, so the charities provide the numbers and the lists to the French Government, because the children are in France; then the French Government have to confirm it to us. They have confirmed that they expect to do that within the next few days. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Heidi Allen) noted, they are doing a census, and during the next few days we expect considerably more information to come from them, which we can work with.

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend raises a very important point: once we have them over here, how will we best look after children who have been traumatised, and families who are feeling vulnerable? We are working closely with the local authorities to ensure that they can provide the necessary support, and we can assist them.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I welcome the Home Secretary’s statement and the sense of urgency that she brings to this important issue. These are deeply traumatised children. Can she update the House on not only what mental health provision will be available for them when they come to this country, but what is being done to identify families who will have the specialist skills to help and support those children coming here under the Dubs amendment?

Amber Rudd: I can assure the right hon. Lady that if we have all the information from the French, which we expect to get over the next week or so before they clear the camp, we will move very quickly—within a few days—and remove those children where we can. There will be no hesitation. Part of my conversation with my French counterpart was about ensuring that he and I, as the two Ministers responsible, have a direct line to ensure that there is no bureaucracy slowing down any of the action that needs to be taken.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Will the Home Secretary join me in thanking my constituents Esther and Tim O’Connor, who have visited the camp and done everything they can in a voluntary attention to the question from the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) about a taskforce? We seem to be arguing about bureaucracy, but these are children who need help. Cannot a British and French taskforce get into that camp and sort it out?
capacity to help to ease the situation, particularly for children? Has she had any discussions with her French counterpart on the Le Touquet agreement, and does she expect any changes to that agreement in the coming months?

Amber Rudd: I join the hon. Gentleman in thanking any of his constituents, particularly Mr and Mrs O’Connor, who have been so helpful in supporting vulnerable people in the camp. With regard to the Le Touquet agreement, it is well known that in the French political engagement, there is a certain discussion about it. I believe that it serves us as well as it serves France, and I confidently expect it to stay in place.

heading to the glacial speed of transferring children with relatives under the Dublin agreement come to the UK. Now that what is happening, because the level of concern about the children in the camp and ensuring that their best interests are looked after. Our French counterparts are sensitive to ensuring that those children are looked after—and they are led, as we are, by the humanitarian need to look after them.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): In the last hour, the media have been reporting that the Home Office has announced the doubling of asylum experts in France working on the Calais cases—from one to two officials. Does the Home Secretary really think that is enough?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady has an advantage over me; I have not seen that particular announcement. [Interruption.] It has been my great pleasure to be here for the past hour; naturally, she has seen it before I have. I look forward to having a good look at it, and if she would like me to, I will certainly write to her about it.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Would it not have been a good idea for the Home Secretary to make that announcement in the House, rather than a press officer doing it from her Department? However, we are talking about some of the most vulnerable children, by any objective measure, in the world: children who will have been traumatised in a way that no child should be traumatised, and children who will have seen things that no child should have seen. Will she turn on its head the budget; it is about having the absolute determination to ensure that those children are looked after—and focus to make sure that we address the need to take those children out, where there is a legal right to do so. I hope that I have reassured him and the rest of the House that we will be doing that as the French move towards their clearances.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): My constituents have looked on with utter dismay this year at the glacial speed of transferring children with relatives in this country. What reassurances can the Home Secretary give my constituents that that will be sped up sufficiently, and that the medical needs that will inevitably have arisen among the nearly 1,000 children unaccompanied and alone in Calais will be dealt with?

Amber Rudd: I respect my constituent, however, and do not wish to comment or mislead. I will write to her and focus to make sure that those children are protected, so that their future is as bright as that of any other children?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman, I am sure, will have heard my comment earlier that this is not about the budget; it is about having the absolute determination and focus to make sure that we address the need to take those children out, where there is a legal right to do so. I hope that I have reassured him and the rest of the House that we will be doing that as the French move towards their clearances.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): The last time there was a clearance in Calais, 129 children went missing. Demolition is due to start again, perhaps within the next few days, so the Home Secretary will understand the intense desire in this House to know that there will be a change and progress. Will she return to the House, perhaps on Thursday or next Monday, to tell us what is happening? She will not say how many children are affected, but will she tell us as much as she can about what is happening, because the level of concern about the issue in the House is unprecedented?

Amber Rudd: I agree with the hon. Lady that the level of concern is very high, and for good reason, because we all want to ensure that those children are looked after. I can say, after careful conversations with our French counterparts, that they have learned lessons from previous clearances, but there is a very sensitive balancing act between trying to get the right information out to the children in the camp and ensuring that their best interests are looked after. Our French counterparts are sensitive to ensuring that those children are looked after—and they are led, as we are, by the humanitarian need to look after them.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I recognise the genuine efforts that the Secretary of State has made to deal with this very difficult issue—an issue that has captured the hearts of many people across the United Kingdom. However, does she not recognise that as long as the criminal gangs who bring these people to our shores are free to operate, the problems we are dealing with today will re-emerge tomorrow? What action is she taking to ensure stiffer prison sentences, the seizing of assets, and co-operation with other Governments to cut down the international network that these gangs have, and to cut off the routes by which they bring people to the United Kingdom?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: the people really profiting from this are the criminal gangs who deal in this terrible crime of trafficking children.
and people. We are working internationally, and primarily across the EU, to ensure that we stop these gangs and, where we can, disrupt them, so they stop this heinous crime.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): I also welcome the Home Secretary’s sense of urgency, but while the Government were dallying about this, hundreds of local authorities around the country were already ready and willing to register, transport and accommodate these children. Could I ask her officials to work in particular with Hammersmith and Fulham Council? It is a personal initiative of the leader—Stephen Cowan—and Lord Dubs, who is a Hammersmith resident, to do everything necessary to help the children of the jungle.

Amber Rudd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that comment, and he is right: it is great that so many councils have stepped forward and said that they are willing to take children. I will urge my officials to work particularly with Hammersmith, which I know has generously stepped forward with assistance, and we look forward to taking that up.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): The Home Secretary made the very welcome statement that the UK had a duty to protect and look after those children with a legal right to be in the UK. She talked about having the determination and focus to deliver that. Will she match those commitments with a commitment to deploying the necessary resources to ensure that the job is done properly, and that no child, as a result of failure on the part of the UK to do its job, goes missing in that camp in Calais?

Amber Rudd: I can reassure the hon. Lady that the UK Government will not lack resource commitment to remove the children who are eligible to come here under the Dublin agreement or who qualify under Dubs. On the children being cleared from the camp, I once more say that this camp is in France. We will do what we can, and we will lean into the French. We have offered them assistance with money and security. Our priority—and, to be fair, theirs—is to make sure that those children are protected. We will give them all the support we can.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): What recent discussions has the Home Secretary had with the French Government on the future steps to be taken to avoid another Calais camp acting as a magnet next year, to the detriment of another generation of vulnerable children?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Gentleman raises an absolutely critical point. This camp will be cleared by the French, but what will be done to make sure that another one does not grow up, given that although the clearance of Sangatte in 2002 was supposed to be the end, we now have the jungle in Calais? The French are taking that point very seriously: they have plans to ensure that another camp does not grow up. He will forgive me for not entirely disclosing those plans, but careful consideration is being given to them, and I would be happy to speak to him about that.

Next Steps in Leaving the European Union

4.25 pm

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on the next steps in leaving the European Union.

The mandate for Britain to leave the European Union is clear, overwhelming and unarguable. As the Prime Minister has said more than once, we will make a success of Brexit, and no one should seek to find ways to thwart the will of the people expressed in the referendum on 23 June. It is now incumbent on the Government to deliver an exit in the most orderly and smooth way possible, delivering maximum certainty for businesses and workers. I want to update the House on how the Government plan to reflect UK withdrawal from the European Union on the statute book while delivering that certainty and stability.

We will start by bringing forward a great repeal Bill that will mean the European Communities Act 1972 ceases to apply on the day we leave the EU. It was this Act that put EU law above UK law, so it is right, given the clear instruction for exit given to us by the people in the referendum, that we end the authority of European Union law. We will return sovereignty to the institutions of this United Kingdom. That is what people voted for on 23 June: for Britain to take control of its own destiny, and for all decisions about taxpayers’ money, borders and laws to be taken here in Britain.

The referendum was backed by six to one in this House. On all sides of the argument—leave and remain—we have a duty to respect and carry out the people’s instruction. As I have said, the mandate is clear, and we will reject any attempt to undo the referendum result, any attempt to hold up the process unduly or any attempt to keep Britain in the EU by the back door by those who did not like the answer they were given on 23 June.

We are consulting widely with business and Parliament, and we want to hear and take account of all views and opinions. The Prime Minister has been clear that we will not be giving a running commentary, because that is not the way to get the right deal for Britain, but we are committed to providing clarity where we can as part of this consultative approach. Naturally, I want this House to be engaged throughout, and we will observe the constitutional and legal precedents that apply to any new treaty on a new relationship with the European Union. Indeed, my whole approach is about empowering this place. [Interruption.] Think about it.

The great repeal Act will convert existing European Union law into domestic law, wherever practical. That will provide for a calm and orderly exit, and give as much certainty as possible to employers, investors, consumers and workers. We have been clear that UK employment law already goes further than European Union law in many areas, and this Government will do nothing to undermine those rights in the workplace. I notice there were no cheers for that on the Labour Benches.

In all, there is more than 40 years of European Union law in UK law to consider, and some of it simply will not work on exit. We must act to ensure there is no black hole in our statute book. It will then be for this House—I repeat, this House—to consider changes to
our domestic legislation to reflect the outcome of our negotiation and our exit, subject to international treaties and agreements with other countries and the EU on matters such as trade.

The European Communities Act means that if there is a clash between an Act of the UK Parliament and EU law, European Union law prevails. As a result, we have had to abide by judgments delivered by the European Court of Justice in its interpretation of European Union law. The great repeal Bill will change that with effect from the day we leave the European Union.

Legislation resulting from the UK’s exit must work for the whole of the United Kingdom. To that end, although no one part of the UK can have a veto over our exit, the Government will consult the devolved Administrations. I have already held initial conversations with the leaders of the devolved Governments about our plans, and I will make sure that the devolved Administrations have every opportunity to work closely with us.

Let me be absolutely clear: this Bill is a separate issue from when article 50 will be triggered. The great repeal Bill is not what will take us out of the EU, but what will ensure the UK statute book is fit for purpose after we have left. It will put the elected politicians in this country fully in control of determining the laws that affect its people’s lives—something that does not apply today.

To leave the EU, we will follow the process set out in article 50 of the treaty on European Union. The Prime Minister will invoke article 50 no later than the end of March next year. That gives us the space required to do the necessary work to shape our negotiating strategy. The House will understand that this is a very extensive and detailed programme of work that will take some time. The clarity on the timing of our proposed exit also gives the European Union the time needed to prepare its position for the negotiation. The President of the European Council, Donald Tusk, said that the Prime Minister had brought, and I quote, “welcome” certainty on the timing of Brexit talks.

We will, as Britain always should, abide by our treaty obligations. We will not tear up EU law unilaterally, as some have suggested, but ensure that there is stability and certainty as Britain takes control on the day of exit, and not before.

People have asked what our plan is for exit. This is the first stage. To be prepared for an orderly exit, there is a need to move forward on domestic legislation, in parallel with our European negotiation, so that we are ready for the day of our withdrawal, when the process set out in article 50 concludes. Therefore, I can tell the House that we intend to introduce the great repeal Bill in the next parliamentary Session. It demonstrates the Government’s determination to deliver the will of the British people, expressed in the EU referendum result, that Britain should once again make its own laws for its own people.

It is nations that are outward-looking, enterprising and agile that will prosper in an age of globalisation. I believe that when we have left the European Union, when we are once again in true control of our own affairs, we will be in an even stronger position to confront the challenges of the future. The Government will build a global Britain that will trade around the world, build new alliances with other countries and deliver prosperity for its people.

Repeal Bill, so we are having a conversation and debate now about what will happen at the very end of the process instead of what is happening at the beginning of the process. That Bill will not provide for parliamentary scrutiny of the article 50 negotiating plans; it is about what will happen after exit. Can he confirm that the vote on the great repeal Bill will come after, not before, article 50 is invoked next March?

The Secretary of State makes much of the great repeal Bill, so we are having a conversation and debate now about what will happen at the very end of the process instead of what is happening at the beginning of the process. That Bill will not provide for parliamentary scrutiny of the article 50 negotiating plans; it is about what will happen after exit. Can he confirm that the vote on the great repeal Bill will come after, not before, article 50 is invoked next March?

We accept and respect the result of the referendum, but neither those who voted to remain nor those who voted to leave gave the Government a mandate to take an axe to our economy. Throughout the process, the national interest must come first, but by flouting with hard Brexit the Prime Minister puts at risk Britain’s access to the single market, rather than doing the right thing for jobs, business and working people in this country. In fact, I observe that the words “single market” did not appear at all in today’s statement. So much for putting the national interest first.
Mr Davis: The hon. Lady is shouting, “What about our economy?” That is the answer: we want the most open barrier-free access to the European market. We have heard lots and lots of very unhelpful—misleading, frankly—comments about hard Brexit and soft Brexit. We want the best possible access terms, full stop. The best terms—that is it.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his statement, and urge him to resist the temptation of advice from a second-rate lawyer who does not even understand the parliamentary process? If he is to advise his opposite number, the hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), he might remind him that the repeal of the European Communities Act 1972 will give many opportunities to amend and debate every single aspect of the discussions around the invoking of article 50. In case the hon. and learned Gentleman has not noticed, the Opposition have the device of Opposition days, when they can debate absolutely anything they choose, including the whole issue of the European Union. May I urge my right hon. Friend to get on with the process and not to listen to those who want to bog it down and never let it happen?

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): May I also thank the Secretary of State for coming to the House to try to update us today? I wish him all the best for trying to get through his statement without getting into trouble with his boss, the Prime Minister, this time. He seems to be aiming to do that by not telling us anything. We may be no clearer on whether this is a soft Brexit or a hard Brexit, but we know it is a dog’s Brexit. I will be frank: this Government’s frankly irresponsible failure to provide any details about their plans is having an impact beyond this place. The Fraser of Allander Institute reckons that in Scotland alone there could be between 30,000 and 80,000 jobs lost because of his plans to take us out of the European Union.

My first question is, will the Secretary of State tell us what plans he has to formally involve the devolved Administrations? I noticed that he talked previously about involving them, but now talks about consulting them. The Government have provided us no answers, so I am going to try to make it easy for him. He has had 89 days since he took up his post—three months on Thursday. To stop him getting into any more trouble with the Prime Minister, I am going to make the next question very, very simple. Does he agree with page 72 of the Conservative party manifesto, on which he was elected, that it should be “yes to the Single Market”?

In fact, I will make it easier: is it his objective to keep the United Kingdom in the single market?
Mr Davis: Well, that was longer on length than it was on content. Let me answer both the hon. Gentleman's comments. He intimated that he was not going to invoke the devolved Administrations. That is not the case, as his own leader in Scotland will tell him—indeed, she was called before we announced the great repeal Act to make sure she was aware of it. I cannot remember her exact words, but she said she thought it was very straightforward or common sense—something of that nature.

On our approach to the negotiations, I will not go into the details, but it is very clear. The objectives are simple: to meet the instruction from the British people, which means regaining control of our borders, regaining control of our laws and regaining control of our money, and at the same time getting the best possible access to the European market that we can negotiate—end of story. It is very simple.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): By definition, we cannot negotiate taking back control—we have to take back control; that is what we voted for—so I find the Secretary of State's view very clear and refreshing. Does he agree that the way to deal with the trade issue is to offer to our partners to carry on trading tariff-free on the same basis as at present and to challenge them to say how they want to wreck it?

Mr Davis: My right hon. Friend is right that we want to operate tariff-free, but it is not just tariff barriers. We also have to negotiate non-tariff barriers. It is central to the argument he makes that it is in both Europe's interest and our interest to have tariff-free and non-tariff barrier based trade. That is where the jobs are. The hon. Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins) raised the question of jobs in Scotland. It is jobs in the whole of the United Kingdom that we have to maintain, expand and create opportunities for, and that is precisely what we will do.

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): There is clearly a mandate for Brexit from the referendum, but there is no mandate for the particular form of Brexit. Three days before he was appointed, the Secretary of State published an article saying it was very important to publish a pre-negotiation White Paper. Can he tell us when he will publish that White Paper? As someone who for many years railed about the importance of the powers of Back Benchers and Parliament against the Executive, can he now give us, with a straight face, an answer to this question: where is the Government's mandate for their negotiations, either from this House or from the country?

Mr Davis: Let us deal with the last question first. I really cannot believe my ears. Here we have the largest mandate that this country has ever given to a Government on any subject in our history. It is very plain. Frankly, I will not take lectures from the right hon. Gentleman on accountability either. We have two things to balance. One is the national interest in getting the right negotiation. I know of no negotiation in history, either in commerce or in politics or international affairs, where telling everybody what we are going to do in precise detail before we do so leads to a successful outcome. What I have said to two Select Committees of this House and the other House—indeed, I said this in the last statement—is that we will be as open as we can be. There will be plenty of debates on this matter. What we will not do is lay out a detailed strategy and a detailed set of tactics before we engage with our opposite numbers in the negotiation.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): May I make it very clear that, like everybody on the Government Benches, I was elected on a clear manifesto promise to respect and honour the referendum result? We know that we will leave the European Union, but the comments of the director general of the CBI should cause us all much concern. She has confirmed the fears of many on these Benches that there is a danger that this Government appear to be turning their back on the single market and not valuing the real benefit of migrant workers. Can my right hon. Friend now give assurances to British business that we have not turned our back on the single market and that we welcome migrant workers to this country?

Mr Davis: My right hon. Friend was, if I remember correctly, at the Conservative party conference, and she may have heard what I said there. There were two things that relate to this. One is that the single market is one description of the way the European Union operates, but there are plenty of people who have access to the single market, some of them tariff-free, who make a great success of that access, and it is that success that we are aiming for.

The other point I made was that the global competition for talent is something that we must engage in. If we are going to win the global competition in economic terms, we must engage in the global competition for talent. We are entirely determined to do that, but that does not mean, and it is not the same as, having no control of immigration. They are very different issues. We will be going for global talent and we will be going for the best market access we can obtain.

Mr Nick Clegg (Sheffield, Hallam) (LD): I have always been a great admirer of the Secretary of State for his staunch defence of civil liberties and his staunch defence of the prerogatives of this House. I was a great admirer when he brought forward the Parliamentary Control of the Executive Bill in 1999 and stirringly told us that

“Executive decisions by the Government should be subject to the scrutiny and approval of Parliament”.—[Official Report, 22 June 1999; Vol. 352, c. 931.] Can he tell us on the basis of what constitutional principle he believes the Prime Minister can now arrogate to herself the exclusive right to interpret what Brexit means and impose it upon the country, rather than protect the rightful role of scrutiny and approval of this House?

Mr Davis: Here we go again. The right hon. Gentleman cannot tell the difference between accountability and micromanagement—it really is as simple as that. The simple truth is that there will be debates galore in this House, starting on Wednesday and thereafter, about what the Government’s strategy will be. We will tell the House as much as we can, but not enough to compromise the negotiation. At every turn, right through to the end, we will obey the conventions and laws that apply to the creation, removal and reform of treaties: every single one. This Government believe in the rule of law and that is how we will behave.
Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Has my right hon. Friend observed that some seem to have forgotten that the European Union Referendum Act 2015 gave the right to make the decision? Furthermore, the sovereignty of the people was given the opportunity to make that decision on the occasion of the referendum itself. As regards the repeal Bill, the sovereignty of Parliament will be maintained, because it will be decided in this House. All the procedures relating to article 50 are Government prerogative and not subject to the decision of Parliament itself at this stage.

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is exactly right. He will remember that the Referendum Bill was carried in this House by a 6:1 majority, which included the vast majority of those on the Opposition Benches. He will also, because he is a constitutional lawyer, understand better than anyone else that Crown prerogative rests on the will of the people—that is the theoretical underpinning of it. There is no exercise of Crown prerogative in history that is better underpinned by the will of the people than this particular exercise.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): This is the first time I have ever heard parliamentary sovereignty referred to as micromanagement.

In the past few weeks, we have seen many hundreds of thousands of foreign nationals working here question the welcome they received in this country and their future in this country. We know that many UK citizens living and working abroad in Europe are going through similar turmoil. We have heard now that the Foreign Office has told the London School of Economics that it cannot involve foreign nationals in the work of Brexit as part of a contract. Will the Secretary of State condemn that? Will he reassure the UK citizens living abroad, and will he reassure EU citizens living and working here that they are welcome here in this country? Will he reassure Parliament that, however the Brexit negotiations go, the current arrangement will be maintained?

Mr Davis: I am sure the hon. Lady would not willingly give the House information that is not right, so let me first say that the supposed decision or comment from the Foreign Office is simply not true. I am assured of that by the Foreign Secretary sitting next to me and I think the LSE has also said that.

The other point the hon. Lady made, which is one I raised last week, is extremely serious. I will say two things, first not on the legal status, but on the attitude of some people post-referendum—the encouragement of hatred and so on. I condemn that unreservedly and I think everybody in this House would condemn that whipping up of hatred unreservedly. In terms of European migrants here, the intention of the Government is to do everything possible to underwrite and guarantee their position, at the same time as we underwrite the similar position of British migrants abroad. That is what we intend to do—

Emily Thornberry: When?

Mr Davis: I will answer that shout from the Front Bench. The answer is as soon as I can get that negotiation concluded with the European Union—full stop. Individuals should not worry people unnecessarily or get them concerned. Bear in mind, five out of six migrants who are here either already have indefinite leave to remain or will have it by the time we depart the Union. It is an important question that I take seriously, and I am determined that we get an outcome that is successful for everyone.

Mr Peter Lilley (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Did my right hon. Friend note the comments by President Hollande that the United Kingdom should be made to pay a price for leaving the EU, presumably by having tariffs imposed on our trade with it? Did he respond to the President that clearly he feels that, in the absence of such punishment, leaving the EU would leave the UK manifestly better off? Such punishment would fall primarily on French exporters, as they export far more to us, whereas our exporters are benefiting from a 14% improvement in their competitiveness—three times the likely tariffs, on average, that may be imposed on them.

Mr Davis: My right hon. Friend—and erstwhile Trade Secretary, if I remember correctly—is exactly right. The damage done by a supposed punishment strategy would be primarily to the industries and farmers on the continent who export to this country. I am afraid that Mr Hollande, Mrs Merkel and others will experience pressure from their own constituents that says, “This is not a good strategy to pursue.” In this country, we believe in free trade because it is beneficial to both sides. I do not see the logic in exercising a punishment strategy against one of their strongest and most loyal allies.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): EU citizens living here and UK citizens living in the EU deserve to hear as soon as possible from the Government that their rights are protected and will continue to be protected. Within that process, will the Secretary of State also talk to the Home Secretary and recognise that the current system of registration certificates, residence cards, indefinite leave and permanent residence requirements for comprehensive health insurance is incoherent and inconsistent? Unless he gets some consistency into that whole packet, establishing those rights and how we go further will be very difficult.

Mr Davis: The right hon. Lady had an opportunity about half an hour ago to make that point directly to the Home Secretary, but I will draw it to my right hon. Friend’s attention. That is the best thing I can do. The simple truth is that I am concerned if people are afraid for their position in this country, and we will put that right as soon as we can.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): My right hon. Friend will understand and probably appreciate the irony that the more successful he is in delivering a negotiation that meets the mutual interests of ourselves and the 27, the greater the political challenge for the 27, as it will be seen as rewarding the United Kingdom for Brexit. That opens the rather obvious possibility that at the end of the negotiations they may be blocked, either by a qualified minority on the Council or by the European Parliament. I welcome his undertaking to deliver certainty and clarity where he can, but what plans does he have to enumerate publicly the implications of having no deal at the end of two years of negotiations?

Mr Davis: What I say to my hon. Friend at this point is that if the European Union adheres to a punishment plan and it fails—as I believe it would—that would be an even bigger incentive to countries that want to leave for comprehensive health insurance is incoherent and inconsistent? Unless he gets some consistency into that whole packet, establishing those rights and how we go further will be very difficult.
than no punishment plan at all. The approach that is being talked about would put at risk the stability of the European Union, which has financial instabilities of its own, and it should take that seriously.

**Mr Speaker:** I gently implore the Secretary of State to face the House so that we can all benefit from his mellifluous tones. *[Interruption.]* Somebody chunters rather ungraciously from a sedentary position or otherwise, “You pays your money and you takes your choice,” but the right hon. Gentleman must be heard.

**Helen Goodman** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Last week, the Government were required to publish the submission they put into the court defending their reasons for using the royal prerogative. This is what it said:

“The relief sought...to compel the Secretary of State to introduce legislation into Parliament to give effect to the outcome of the referendum— is constitutionally impermissible. The Court would be trespassing on proceedings in Parliament.”

It is obviously nonsensical to say that to involve Parliament is trespassing on Parliament. Did the Secretary of State really give the instructions to the lawyers for this submission?

**Mr Davis:** I shall be very careful because one has to be careful when we are talking about court cases. The main guidance I gave to the Attorney-General was that a would-be vote in this House on article 50 could have two outcomes. It either lets it through or it stops it. If it stops it, what would be the outcome? It would be a refusal to implement the decision of the British people, creating as a result a constitutional problem to say the least. That was then interpreted by the lawyers as they saw fit.

**Mrs Cheryl Gillan** (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): May I congratulate the Secretary of State on the steady and careful progress he is making at the head of a brand-new Department after being in the job for only 12 weeks? I think he is now dealing with a totally unprecedented constitutional issue and that he should take it slowly and carefully. The Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee had the Cabinet Secretary before it on 14 September. He told us that there was no shortage of very talented and highly qualified civil servants queuing up to join my right hon. Friend’s Department and the other new Department of State. However, he also told us that it was only staffed to the level of 80%. Can the Secretary of State tell us whether he is now fully staffed at 100%?

**Mr Davis:** I thank my right hon. Friend for her compliments, but I would say two things to her. First, we need to make expeditious progress. That is, I think, one of the requirements that the referendum lays upon us. Secondly, the staffing is not yet 100% because we have to acquire sets of very specific skills. There have recently been arguments in the papers about everything from passporting to customs and just-in-time systems, and we have to be able to deal with that. These are not normally skills that are widely available in Whitehall, so it will take a little time to get from 80% to 100%.

**Hilary Benn** (Leeds Central) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State understand that the conflicting signals emanating from the Government about the type of Brexit that they wish to pursue are creating a great deal of uncertainty among businesses and the people who rely on them for their living, one aspect of which is the fear that we might leave the European Union without an agreement on trade, which would leave these businesses to cope on World Trade Organisation terms? Can the Secretary of State tell the House whether it is his policy, in those circumstances, to seek a transitional agreement to cover the period until such time as a final status agreement on trade and market access is agreed with the other 27 member states?

**Mr Davis:** I am inclined to say that the right hon. Gentleman’s father will be smiling down on both of us. He makes a good point on the effect of the uncertainty. It is partly a problem of the preparation process and that there is less out there. I have said to every single interest group I have spoken to—that includes the CBI, despite the comments made this morning, the British Chambers of Commerce, the Engineering Employers Federation and others, as well as the TUC and others on the other side—that we need to have the hard data about the nature of the problem. For example, there are about nine different sorts of passports and we need to be more specific. We also need hard data about the size of the problem in terms of both money and jobs, and the actions we can take to deal with that. That is why we need to take the time until perhaps March. In doing so, we will try to winnow down the size of the negotiation that needs to be done, and then make it faster than it would otherwise be.

We start with an advantage, which the right hon. Gentleman, being who he is, has probably spotted, in that we will have exactly the same regulatory basis on the day we leave as the rest of the European Union. That is normally the biggest thing that gets in the way of major trade negotiations. I therefore do not expect the circumstance he describes. I will not offer a view, but simply say this: we will do everything possible to protect, enhance and maximise the opportunities for British business. He can draw his conclusion from that.

**Michael Gove** (Surrey Heath) (Con): My right hon. Friend will be aware that sometimes it is very important to pay attention to the liberal elite. He will be aware that, on referendum night, we were told:

“I will forgive no one who does not respect the sovereign voice of the British people once it has spoken whether it is a majority of 1% or 20%. When the British people have spoken you do what they command... Either you believe in democracy or you don’t.”

Those are the words of Lord Ashdown of Norton-sub-Hamdon in the district of Yeovil in the county of Somerset, who is the most elitist liberal I know, which is saying something. I therefore urge my right hon. Friend to be true to the views of Lord Ashdown, the principles of liberalism and the traditions of this House, and to give effect to the British people’s vote. Seventeen million votes were cast on 23 June for Britain to leave the European Union. Attempts by anti-democratic and illiberal voices on the Opposition Benches to thwart the British people’s will will rightly be treated with disdain.

**Mr Davis:** The liberal my right hon. Friend mentions is the mentor of my favourite liberal. I have to tell my right hon. Friend that I consider myself to be a liberal Conservative, so I am not entirely sure that I accept his characterisation of the liberal elite, but I take his point that the referendum was the biggest mandate given to a British Government ever. It is our job to carry it out and we will not allow it to be thwarted.
Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): This summer’s new £5 note is 15% smaller than the old one, but since the referendum the value of the pound in our pocket has shrunk by even more than that because of the Government’s actions. Our constituents did not vote to be poorer. Should not the Secretary of State at least offer an apology?

Mr Davis: That is an extraordinary assertion, even if it parodies Harold Wilson, one of the hon. Gentleman’s previous heroes.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): Will the Secretary of State please clarify for the benefit of Opposition Front Benchers this incredibly simple point: independent countries can trade most successfully with the single market without being a member of the single market?

Mr Davis: My right hon. Friend is right that more than 20 countries have had more success in growth terms when trading into the single market than we have had in the past 10 or 20 years. He is absolutely right that it is not necessary to be a member of the single market to trade incredibly successfully inside it.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The press reported over the weekend that hate crime was up following the Brexit vote. In particular, homophobic attacks were up 147%. Given that members of the Secretary of State’s Government and party fostered an atmosphere of division and intolerance, what will they do during the negotiations to ensure that the human rights of everyone in our society are protected?

Mr Davis: I will be blunt. I will not take lectures on fostering division from the Scottish National party.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I point out, as a director of Vote Leave, that it was my hon. Friend who got me into it. Mr Davis: If I may say so, that is a slight collapsing of what I said in that article, which I remember very well. The simple truth is that on the day we leave the European Union we will be looking to set up a whole series of very beneficial trade deals. That is an enormous benefit of being outside the Union.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I welcome the statement from my right hon. Friend, and I welcome what the Prime Minister said last week about triggering article 50. As someone who is alleged to have voted to remain in the European Union I take that as a matter of process on which I accept a mandate from the British people on 23 June. As for the detail of the negotiation, that is rather different. May I press my right hon. Friend on what he meant by engagement with Parliament, and whether that is the same as influence? It is one thing to come to Parliament and be engaged and tell Parliament what the Government are doing. It is quite another to come and be engaged and influenced by Parliament on things that we still need to clarify.

Mr Davis: My right hon. Friend—my right hon. Friend; I will not hold the allegation against him—makes a very good point. I point to my own history. For a considerable period—which is five years, I think—I negotiated another treaty with the European Union. [Interruption.] It was Amsterdam. The approach was very simple. We did not disclose the upcoming negotiation, but we talked about what was under way and what the priorities were, and that is how I expect this to pan out in future. There will be large numbers of debates in the House, with the first on Wednesday, and even if we did not want to do it—but we will—the Opposition could have as many debates as they liked on the subject. I do not accept the argument that we are simply not going to talk about this.

Second, there will be a Select Committee whose sole job for the few years for which it will exist will be to scrutinise the Department. As far as I can, I will be open with it, but I will not give away things if that is detrimental to the national interest. This is an important point to remember: it is the national interest that is engaged, whether we want to talk about the outcome, or whether we want to get the outcome.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State take steps to achieve an early UK withdrawal from the common fisheries policy, with the re-establishment of Britain’s historic waters, both to rebuild fish stocks in our seas and to revive the British fishing industry?

Mr Davis: The hon. Gentleman has raised a very important benefit of leaving the European Union, but I cannot promise him an early departure on that issue alone. We will obey EU law, and all the policies that go with it, until the last day we are in the EU. Thereafter, we will get the benefits that the hon. Gentleman has mentioned, and they will be very sizeable benefits.
Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend accept from me that it is clear beyond any doubt what the country voted for? He is right to say that our countrymen want to see our country as outward-looking, enterprising and agile, and as a country that will prosper in a very difficult and fraught period in our lives. What will matter, however, is ensuring that our fellow citizens can have absolute confidence in this perilous process, and that Parliament plays its historic role, to which he and I have always attached the most profound importance.

Mr Davis: I pay particular attention to my right hon. Friend’s comments. I know that he was a fierce remaine r who fought hard for the cause. He has, however, taken on board the fact that it is now our duty to make the will of the British people come into being in the best possible way. He knows my history, so he must take it as read that I will treat Parliament with respect, but I will not give up the national interest in negotiating terms to that end. I will carry out the balancing act to the best of my ability, and I will leave the judgment of whether that it is good enough with my right hon. Friend.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Can the Secretary of State explain how a margin of 4% in a referendum in which Brexitiers themselves confessed that they had voted to leave for a variety of reasons can become what he has just described as an overwhelming mandate for what the Government are currently doing in respect of a “hard Brexit”, with all the damage that that will entail for our economy and our prosperity?

Mr Davis: The majority was over a million. This was, I think, the largest vote gained by any Government ever. [Interruption.] I assume that the right hon. Gentleman voted “remain”. It is rather rich for someone like him, who voted the other way, to try to be the arbiter and interpreter of those who voted to leave.

First, we must obey the democratic instruction that we were given. Secondly, I strongly challenge the idea that this will somehow cause an economic downturn. It will not: it will create economic opportunities on a major scale, and that is what we look forward to.

Mr Andrew Tyrie (Chichester) (Con): The Government’s negotiating position will leak as soon as other member states are told about it. Does the Secretary of State not recognise that it would be wholly unacceptable for the British public to find out what the United Kingdom’s position is from our counterparts in the negotiations?

Mr Davis: Had the Chairman of the Treasury Committee read my evidence to the Lords Select Committee, he would have seen that I gave an undertaking that this House and the other House would be at least as well informed as democratic institutions on the continent, including the European Parliament. That has never been done before, but it will be done now.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I welcome the Secretary of State’s assurance that he will consult the leaders of devolved Administrations, and I assure him that the leader of our party will work with him to ensure successful negotiations for our exit from the European Union. Will he recognise, however, that the rhetoric that we have heard today about parliamentary scrutiny is really designed to do one of two things—either to overturn the referendum result, or to undermine the negotiating position that the Government would take by continual squabbling in the Chamber about the bottom line? Does he agree that the vast majority of people in the United Kingdom now want the Government to go out and ensure that we have control of our borders, the ability to spend our own money, and the ability to make our own laws?

Mr Davis: The hon. Gentleman is exactly right. The words that he used were not “52%”, but “the vast majority”. The vast majority of the country wants us to get on with this and to make a success of it, and that is what we will do.

Let me also say to the hon. Gentleman that one of the areas receiving the most attention at the moment is Northern Ireland. We do have issues to resolve on the border, and we will resolve them. We will not return to the old borders—the border style of old. We will maintain the common travel area. Indeed, we will maintain all the benefits that we had in Northern Ireland before we entered the European Union.

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): Frau Merkel is reported to have been cheered by German industrialists for asserting that Britain will not have access to continental markets unless we are prepared to accept free movement of labour. Will my right hon. Friend tell her that securing our borders was a non-negotiable instruction from the British people? Will he also tell her that if she will not make EU markets available to us, industrialists such as BMW, which has its UK headquarters in my constituency, will not be cheering her if tariffs are imposed on German car imports into the United Kingdom?

Mr Davis: I think Mrs Merkel will have read the Prime Minister’s speech last week and will know exactly where our priorities on the control of borders lie. I will not get into tit-for-tat rudeness with our European opposite numbers, because I do not think that that would be successful. I will say, however, that these are the first days of a two-and-a-half-year negotiation, and the first days of negotiations are always tougher than the endgame—[Interruption.] Well, I speak as someone who has done one or two of them, unlike many of the people chuntering on the Opposition Benches. I think we can take it as read that what our European opposite numbers are saying today is not necessarily what they will be saying tomorrow.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I cannot think of any major treaty in history that this country has signed in which the Government have not come to Parliament to get a mandate for their negotiating position. They have done that every single time over the past 400 years. If the right hon. Gentleman really wants to make a success of these negotiations, he needs to gather as much support as he possibly can across the whole country, including among the 48%. That will involve at least a White Paper and preferably a draft repeal Bill before the final repeal Bill.

Mr Davis: First, the European Union Referendum Bill was passed with a majority of six to one. If that was not a mandate, I do not know what was. Secondly, we have a mandate from 17.4 million people, which is the biggest mandate achieved by any Government in history.
Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): The Secretary of State is absolutely right to seek success, but the question is: what does success really look like? What will actually happen when Britain leaves the European Union? Is he thinking of applying any tests along the journey of the negotiations that he feels we might need to meet, particularly in relation to the state of our economy?

Mr Davis: It is hard to have tests along the track of the negotiations; it is the outcome that matters. In response to my opposite number, the hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), I highlighted three of the four main aims that we are after. One is to regain control of our borders. Another is to get back control of our laws. The one I did not list was our aim to keep our justice and security arrangements at least as strong as they are. Finally, and most importantly in this context, the United Kingdom must aim to maintain the best possible open access to European markets and vice versa. If we can achieve all that, there will be no downside to Brexit at all, and considerable upsides.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): There seems to be some political forgetfulness here. Does the Minister not recall that the Chancellor has forecast financial bumps along the road? Others fear that they will not just be Brexit bumps, but that a vast sinkhole will open up in the road, into which the British economy will fall in a tailspin. If that Brexit slump occurs, how can the Minister deny the public a second vote on this? Second thoughts are always better than first thoughts, especially as the referendum was conducted on the basis of untruths from both parties. Is he going to honour the pledge to give an extra £350 million a week to the national health service?

Mr Davis: I am afraid the hon. Gentleman has let the cat out of the bag: he wants a second referendum. There will be no second referendum and there will be no reversal. We shall continue with this.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his statement. In particular, I liked the section in which he said that he wants to give as much certainty as possible to employers, investors, consumers and workers. Half of St Albans’ economically active population works in London, and many of them work in financial services and the knowledge-based economy. What conduit can they have to input into the process through which we are now going, and what assurances can he give me that London and the UK will maximise free trade with Europe while tapping into the growth markets around the world?

Mr Davis: Given that my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) is sitting next to me, I am bound to say that London is a massive global city and an extraordinarily successful one. We will do everything necessary to protect, defend and enhance that success in the markets that my hon. Friend mentioned—in the financial services, the digital markets and the intellectual markets. We are looking at all of them right across the board. She should tell her constituents who want to have an input into the process that they can do so through trade organisations or come directly to the Department to tell us where their concerns are and where they think the opportunities are and we will take their comments on board.

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): Will the Secretary of State confirm that the great repeal Bill will include incorporating all the existing rights currently guaranteed by EU law to EU citizens?

Mr Davis: My job in the first instance is to bring that decision back to this House. What I have said to those who have expressed concerns about that matter is that we will certainly not be removing employment rights or employment law from British citizens as a result of bringing back that process. That is the situation: we will not be withdrawing employment rights as a result of this process.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): I hope you will forgive me, Mr Speaker, for giving the Ladybird guide to the constitution. Her Majesty’s Government are behaving completely correctly and traditionally. It is for the Government to determine treaties, and it is for Parliament to decide whether to bring them into legislation. If Parliament does not like the Government of the day, it can always hold a vote of confidence in that Government to change the negotiating stance. It seems to me that the Opposition may not want that, as they have a record of losing elections at the moment.

Mr Davis: My only response to my hon. Friend is make my day.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Days after the Tory party conference, why has the pound dropped to a 30-year low?

Mr Davis: I recommend the hon. Lady reads the book, “Flash Boys”, because the major part of that fall was the flash crash. There are lots and lots of speculative comments that will drive the pound down and up and down and up over the next two and a half years, and there is little that we can do about it.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): May I ask my right hon. Friend to ignore those people on both sides of the House who cannot bring themselves to come to terms with the referendum result? Will he confirm that there are no such things as hard Brexit and soft Brexit? Is there either Brexit or no Brexit. It is rather like being pregnant—a person is either pregnant or they are not pregnant. We are either in the European Union or out of the European Union. Being in the single market would mean keeping EU laws and the European Court of Justice making decisions. It would also probably mean free movement of people and paying into the EU budget. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that would be a betrayal of what the British people voted for in the referendum?

Mr Davis: Yes, my hon. Friend is right. That is precisely what is driving our negotiating strategy. Beyond that, I say this to him: the words hard and soft Brexit are designed to deceive. They are not meaningful in any way. We are talking about the best possible trade access. The Labour party does not understand the economics of that, but this party does. We are simply going to get the best outcome for this country, and that will be open trade.
Mr Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State recognise that although 52% of people voted for us to leave, of course with the consequence that we will exit the European Union, the worry is that the more than 16 million people who voted to remain are some kind of liberal elite is utterly false and divisive? A majority of young voters, a majority of ethnic minority voters and a majority of people in three of the constituent parts of our country all voted to remain, and the job of the Government is to find a deal that serves the interests of everybody—those who voted to remain and those who voted to leave—not to try to sow further seeds of division in our country.

Mr Davis: The hon. Gentleman will be surprised to hear that I agree with almost every word he said. The only distinction that I would make is that I consider myself a liberal, as I said earlier. The aim of the Government is to find an outcome that meets the needs of all the United Kingdom; again, it is invidious to talk about one’s own speeches, but that is precisely what I said last week. We need to engage the interests of all citizens of the country, whichever way they voted, in order to get the best outcome for the country.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): There has been talk today of vast sinkholes and punishment plans, but surely great nations such as France and Germany act in their own self-interest. Take passporting: what has not been mentioned so far is that 7,000 passports are issued to financial companies in Europe to come into the City of London, and 5,000 passports go in the opposite direction. It is a simple regulatory licensing system, so let us have no more talk about Armageddon for the City of London; a deal can and will be made.

Mr Davis: Yes, my hon. Friend is correct. More generally, one of the things that I have discovered in the past few months is that in many areas—not just the City, and not just as regards cars—the balance of negotiating advantage is incredibly heavily stacked our way.

Owen Smith (Pontypridd) (Lab): I have been at a bit of a loose end in the past few weeks, but I have been putting my time to good use: I have been reading the Secretary of State’s back-catalogue. In one of the speeches I found, which I can quote for him, as it is invidious for him to quote himself, he recommended—this was just a few years ago—that we have two referendums on Brexit, the second referendum being held only when the terms of the negotiation were fully formed. Did he change his mind only when he saw the result of the referendum?

Mr Davis: The hon. Gentleman may have had some time to spare, but he has not used it very well. Indeed, he needs some reading lessons, or maybe reading glasses. Ten years ago—not two years ago; he should get his dates right—when I talked about the possibility of a double referendum, in the early days of our discussions on the matter, I said that we should set up a mandate referendum, laying out exactly what our claims would be, and then if we won that, use it as a lever to get good terms and make a decision thereafter. That is not what the Government did; they put a straight question. If the hon. Gentleman went out on the streets of London and asked people, “What do you think you voted for? Did you vote for a mandate, or did you vote to leave?”, the answer would be that they voted to leave.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I urge my right hon. Friend to ignore the siren calls from the Opposition for a running commentary on our detailed negotiating position, because as everyone knows, that would make for poor outcomes, and it might account for why Labour got rolled over by the EU on so many occasions, including when it came to the sacrifice of our EU rebate. Will my right hon. Friend say a few words on something that has not yet been covered in the statement or questions—that is, on the growing divide in the EU’s position on Brexit between the ideologists in the Commission and the elected politicians, who recognise that if they play hardball and fall back on tariffs, it will cost them much more than it will cost us?

Mr Davis: I need no urging to ignore the party that, after all, gave us the Lisbon treaty. My hon. Friend is right with respect to the viewpoint of nation states. This will take time to play out. Some nation states, including Germany, are at present very committed to making the punishment arguments, but I think that will change. Other nation states are already making the counter-arguments, and we will see that group grow and as the next two and a half years pass.

Rachel Reeves (Leeds West) (Lab): Today at airports, holidaymakers are being offered less than €1 to the pound. My hon. Friends the Members for Nottingham East (Chris Leslie) and for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) have asked about the 15% decline in the value of sterling since the referendum, but so far the Secretary of State has failed to answer. We have seen huge uncertainty since our decision to leave the European Union. What efforts will the Government make to provide greater clarity for businesses and the economy, and to ensure that the Government are a little more careful with their words, which would help with the volatility and the sharp declines we have seen in the value of sterling in recent weeks?

Mr Davis: I really will not take any lectures about being careful with my words from that lot over there. These are the people who have talked the pound down time and again.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Can my right hon. Friend confirm that if the Bill to repeal the European Communities Act 1972 is blocked in the other place, the Government will not hesitate to use the provisions of the Parliament Acts to ensure that the Bill reaches the statute book?

Mr Davis: There is an old adage in politics about not answering hypothetical questions, and that is a hypothetical question. I do not expect the House of Lords to overturn the decision of the British people.

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The Secretary of State will know that the process for exiting the EU will have two steps: first, the article 50 negotiations, which will be by qualified majority voting; and secondly, the negotiation of a new trade deal, which will require unanimity and ratification by all the Parliaments of the EU. Will he guarantee that businesses will have the reassurance, which they desperately need, of a guaranteed transition period, rather than their falling off the cliff edge immediately after the article 50 negotiations conclude?
Mr Davis: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, but I am not sure that he is exactly right about the mechanism for the final decision. He talks about what is effectively the next procedure, which is what has happened to the Canadian treaty. We have not yet engaged in the negotiation process, so we do not know exactly how it will work, whether it will be sequential or parallel—well, it will be parallel—and how the linkage between the various components will work. At that point, I will be in a better position to answer his question.

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend take this opportunity to reassure business leaders around the world that, contrary to what is said in some of the commentary, the Government will grasp the opportunity of Brexit to create a low-tax, lightly regulated, open economy that is ready to seize growing economies around the world and create prosperity for our nation?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is exactly right. Indeed, the Prime Minister has already said that we will become world leaders in free trade. That is the best signal we can give that we are creating an opportunity society for business.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I was recently contacted by a constituent who is a lecturer at the University of Glasgow. Not only does she have serious concerns about the loss of EU funding for universities and colleges, but her partner is a French national who is unsure about where his future will lie, post-Brexit. Why can the Secretary of State not understand that the Government’s reluctance to outline any future plans is having a real and negative impact on many people across the UK?

Mr Davis: First, the Treasury has already made some underpinning promises over the summer about research funding, and they apply to Scotland, so I suggest that the hon. Lady looks carefully at that. As for the concerns of her constituent’s French partner, I have already said that we are doing this as fast as we can, consistent with our responsibilities to not only people in that position, but British citizens abroad.

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): I wonder whether my right hon. Friend shares my interest in and gratitude for the fact that the Opposition are speaking the language of markets, currency and the FTSE, and showing incredible interest in that. Speaking of markets, I would like him to assure the House and my constituents that if we were to leave the single market, we would be an open, welcoming, friendly and dynamic free trade area.

Mr Davis: The point that I have made time and again is that we are seeking the most open, most barrier-free trade in goods and services that we can possibly achieve. Like my hon. Friend, I think it is good to hear those words from across the Floor, even if they are not well understood by those saying them.

Julie Elliott (Sunderland Central) (Lab): When will the Secretary of State reassure businesses based in the UK, and particularly in my city of Sunderland, including the Nissan manufacturing plant, about the potential for tariffs to be paid on every car sold to mainland Europe, as some 80% of cars from the Nissan plant are? Investment has been halted at that plant, and a contract that had already been awarded has been put in abeyance while we wait for reassurances from the Government. When will the Government act on real people’s jobs and reassure companies? That is what is at stake. This is not chitter; it is real people’s jobs. When will the Government act?

Mr Davis: We have said in terms—principally after the Japanese letter—that we are absolutely determined to make sure that we guarantee, or acquire, access for all companies in the UK to the maximum possible number of markets. That is what we are doing.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): I very much welcome my right hon. Friend’s statements. Can he say whether, as part of the consideration process, he will look to review the UK’s involvement in the European Commission’s single European sky initiative?

Mr Davis: Yes, the Department for Transport is on that issue as we speak. They were some of the people I was thinking of when I said that there are many areas where we have a very strong negotiating hand because of our current position. Britain is the strongest target, if there were, for flight arrivals in the entire European Union.

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Many hundreds of people in my constituency working in the automotive and pharmaceutical industries are very worried about the transitional phase between now and when we leave the EU. Decisions are being made by their employers now about investments, and the worry is that those decisions will take investment away from south Liverpool, and put it somewhere else in Europe. What can the Secretary of State do to reassure my constituents, and to reassure those automotive and pharmaceutical businesses about continuing to invest here?

Mr Davis: The first thing I would say is that, if I remember correctly, after the referendum decision, GlaxoSmithKline confirmed multiple hundreds of millions of pounds of investment in this country, so I do not think the pharmaceutical industry is running away from this country—just the reverse. In Europe, the pharmaceutical industry is predominantly in the UK, for reasons that relate to intellectual property among other things. The second thing I would say is that we are consulting widely; one of the things we are doing is establishing where the fears and concerns are, so that we can deal with them. We are doing that accurately and carefully, in exactly the way the hon. Lady would, as I know from her time on the Public Accounts Committee. That, in the long run, will guarantee the jobs of her constituents.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): As a remainer, let me gently say this to the remainers on the Opposition Benches: scupper or delay triggering article 50 at your peril. Workers will not respect you for it; nor will businesses. We must respect the democratic will of the British people. I appreciate the pragmatism surrounding the decision not to involve Parliament in every single minute detail. However, does the Secretary of State agree that Parliament must, constitutionally, be involved in setting out the principles of negotiation—that is, on single market membership and free movement rules—to ensure that when things like the great repeal Bill are put before this House, they receive full support?
Mr Davis: I always pay a lot of attention to the people who voted remain, and take seriously the responsibility we have to the people of this country to make this work. My hon. Friend laid down a couple of criteria that are very tight in one sense. I am saying, in terms, that we want the best outcome, but what is the best outcome? The best outcome is open market access; that is the point. How we do it may come down to what the negotiations are about, but I cannot go into great detail. However, I would say to my hon. Friend that the process, from now until roughly two to two and a half years’ time, or whenever it is, will be absolutely full of parliamentary events—unless the Opposition are not doing their job, but they will do their job; unless the Select Committee is not doing its job, but it will do its job; and unless we try to block things we are obviously not going to block. We take parliamentary accountability very responsibly and very seriously, and we will keep Parliament as well informed as we can.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I agree with the Secretary of State that we need barrier-free access to the single market—no tariff barriers and no non-tariff barriers—but we all know there is a tension between delivering that and restricting free movement. On an all-party visit last month, a German employers’ organisation suggested to us that it might be possible to square the circle by agreeing a redefinition of free movement, so that it applied only to people with a firm job offer in the UK. Are Ministers going to pursue that possibility?

Mr Davis: As always, the right hon. Gentleman has asked a serious question, and I thank him for it. My job is to bring back control of these issues to the United Kingdom, which can then exercise that control in the way that Parliament and the Government see fit. What they negotiate thereafter is not a matter for me to speculate on, and I certainly would not offer an opinion on what is or is not a good negotiating hand at this point in time. However, I hear what he says.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I satisfied my appetite for voting on this question on 23 June, but like my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), I want some influence over the process. However, if influence has to be measured by holding a Division, as Labour Members appear to believe, they might be reminded that they get a Supply day every week.

Mr Davis: My right hon. Friend will of course always influence decisions in this House.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): The Secretary of State has said that he will provide some certainty and clarity. I have had an email from a general practitioner in my constituency saying that a lady who has lived there for over 40 years is having mental health problems as she is concerned about being deported. Parents have contacted me saying that their children are awake at night worried that they are about to lose their mother or their father who is an EU citizen.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Reassure them.

Mrs Moon: It is absolutely imperative that we have some clarity. A glib individual on the Government Benches claims I should reassure them. I have done that, but they need reassurance from the Government, because I do not have such a power. May we at least have clarification that those who have lived in this country for over five years will have an automatic right to remain? They need it, and it is only right that citizens should have such clarity.

Mr Davis: I can give such people absolute clarity: that is the law. Being in Britain for more than five years means that they have indefinite leave to remain. Being in Britain for more than six years gives them the right to citizenship.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): It is perfectly natural for us to want as much detail as possible, but it is more important that the outcome is the success that we need. Does my right hon. Friend therefore agree that we should not tempt him to give details now, but that we should keep as much secret as we can, while our opponents are talking about tariffs and punishments? Should he not do everything he can to play with his cards as close as possible to his chest?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is right, and I will do everything I can to resist temptation.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Should we not at least commend the Secretary of State for once again presenting us, at the Dispatch Box, with a full range of cosmetics without a single microbead of substance? Does he realise that his reassurances about the consultation with the joint First Ministers in Stormont, and his indication of his hopes for the profile of the border, do not measure up to a response on the profound implications that the course he is piloting will have for the Good Friday agreement, with its delicate layers of understanding, constitutional foundations and key political premises?

Mr Davis: I am sorry, but the hon. Gentleman is just wrong. We have already invested a lot of resource in this issue. Indeed, the quotes from the Northern Ireland Secretary on the front page of The Guardian this morning are inaccurate. We are transparent. We are trying to give the Irish Government to determine, as well as we can, a technical mechanism to ensure that we will maintain an open border and underpin the agreement.

Andrew Bridgen: I am disappointed that so many Members of this House—I might politely call them the “unreconcilables”—seem intent on using every ploy of parliamentary procedure to undermine the will of the British people, claiming that it is the democratic right of this House. Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the most important principles of democracy is that everyone’s vote counts the same, and that on 23 June, everyone in the country, including Members of this House, had a vote and the result was clear?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is right. We have a mandate and we should remember that. I have heard, although not today to be honest, some sneering comments from people who seem to think that 17.5 million people do not have the right to hold an opinion.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): After the referendum and three days before his appointment, the right hon. Gentleman wrote in an article that a White Paper outlining the
negotiating terms for Brexit should be published. Will he please explain to the House his thinking at the time of writing that article?

Mr Davis: The simple answer is this. Throughout the entire referendum campaign, I was trying to think through not so much the retention of the European market, but how we best develop the international markets. Those were my thoughts at that time and, as a Back Bencher, I was entirely entitled to have those thoughts.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Airbus is a wonderful example of European co-operation. The fuselages are built in France and Germany, and the wings in this country. Does my right hon. Friend agree that any politician or bureaucrat who tried to punish such a project, which has created so much wealth and prosperity and so many jobs, would be mad, bad or totally out of touch with the people they professed to represent?

Mr Davis: I would simply add one other word. They would be not mad or bad, but simply unwise.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): The tone and content of the Home Secretary’s speech to the Tory party conference were profoundly hostile to the recruitment of international students, who are estimated to be worth £40 billion to the economy and represent a valuable growth market. Will the Secretary of State explain whether he backs the Home Secretary, and will he give assurances that in the Brexit negotiation on EU students, he will do nothing to damage their access, our world-class higher education system or the wider economy?

Mr Davis: Yet again, the hon. Gentleman has missed the point. We have already instructed the Student Loans Company to underpin loans for foreign students to 2016-17. That is an action designed to help students to get here, not the opposite.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Is it not the truth that the depreciation of sterling since 23 June has provided a massive boost to Britain’s international competitiveness and has been great news for British exporters? Has my right hon. Friend been encouraged by the number of countries knocking on exporters? Has my right hon. Friend been encouraged by the competitiveness and has been great news for British exporters? Has my right hon. Friend been encouraged by the number of countries knocking on exporters? Has my right hon. Friend been encouraged by the competitiveness and has been great news for British exporters?

Mr Davis: One of the interesting things today has been the willingness of the Opposition to carp on the downside of every single aspect of Brexit. The simple truth is that those who are talking about the competitiveness of their own industries are not paying attention to the level of the pound. While it has some downsides, it certainly has a very large number of upsides.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): As chair of the all-party group on medical research, I am extremely concerned about the impact of Brexit on scientific and medical research in this country. Scientists have always worked collaboratively across borders, but researchers are now worried about funding and about the job insecurity and uncertainty faced by their EU national colleagues. Can the Secretary of State reassure scientists in this country that their research will continue to be funded and that their EU national colleagues will continue to be welcome to work here?

Mr Davis: The Treasury has given underwriting guarantees, as it were, for the current round of applications, so that is not to be worried about. This country is a science superpower, so the idea that after our departure from the European Union funding will somehow dry up is for the birds—it is simply nonsense. I have had discussions with the presidents of some of the royal academies, and we will continue those discussions with the aim of ensuring that they do not feel at risk. Some of the comments we have got back indicate that the European Union rules on issues such as clinical research have not exactly been helpful to British science, so there will be an improvement, not just an underwriting guarantee.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Many City of London institutions rely on the financial services passport to do business across Europe. Some say that as many as 20% of their jobs depend on that access. The danger is that, as it would take a year or two to relocate staff, some may take action before the end of the two years. To encourage them to keep those jobs here in London, can the Secretary of State give an assurance that financial services passporting or some equivalent mutual recognition is his priority?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend makes a good point; as there may be something like an 18-month lag, some people might try to pre-empt the decision and, rashly, move early. The Treasury has held a roundtable on this specific issue. It has looked very clearly at various mechanisms of mutual recognition as a fall-back on passporting. Somebody made the point earlier that we issue more passports than we seek. As a result, our negotiating leverage in this area is at least reasonable.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): This is the Secretary of State’s second statement on this issue. Frankly, he would have said more if he had said nothing at all. Can we conclude from his statement today that his definition of “taking back control” is that this sovereign Parliament will get no binding say on the negotiating stance, article 50 or even the final deal? What he said today is that of the 28 current members of the European Union, 27 sovereign Parliaments will get a say, but not this one.

Mr Davis: The hon. Gentleman clearly has not been paying attention. The words I used were that we will obey all the conventions and laws that apply to the signing, reform or removal of European treaties. I suggest that he goes and looks those up.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that the voices of agriculture, industry and business more generally are heard as part of our Brexit negotiations, and to ensure that their needs are fully understood?

Mr Davis: First, there have been a number of consultations and discussions with those people. This whole exercise is an all-Government operation. That means that the individual Departments will deal directly with them. Secondly, the Treasury moved unusually
quickly to ensure that they knew that their current round of funding was underpinned, for example under pillar 1 of the common agricultural policy. The Government are taking this matter extraordinarily seriously and they have no reason to worry.

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): I thank the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) for coming to my constituency last week to meet businesses in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. I appreciate the Secretary of State’s point about an open border with the Republic of Ireland, given that four counties of the Republic of Ireland border my constituency, but how does he envisage stopping the smuggling that may take place after Brexit?

Mr Davis: That is a very good and difficult question. The simple truth is that we have to make a judgment, as is the case with all borders of that nature. Norway and Sweden have a good example of an open border, as do Canada and America. There are small-scale movements, but big-scale movements can be found and dealt with.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Writing in The Daily Telegraph following the referendum, the Foreign Secretary claimed that we would still have access to the single market and that the rights of EU citizens living in the UK, and those of UK citizens living abroad, would be respected. If that is no longer the case and the Foreign Secretary was confused, will the Secretary of State clear up these issues in the pre-negotiation White Paper that he promised? Can he tell us when that will be published? If, as the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Mr Jenkin) suggests, the Vote Leave prospectus is to be the basis of the Brexit negotiations, will he tell us when we will be getting £350 million a week for the NHS?

Mr Davis: The simple answer is that we will seek to get the most open, barrier-free market that we can. That will be as good as a single market.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): As the Secretary of State knows, large swathes of EU law are intertwined with devolved legislation in Wales, and indeed in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Will he confirm that in the proposed great repeal Bill, and in their actions thereafter, the UK Government will not interfere with Welsh legislation without the formal— I emphasise formal—consent of the National Assembly?

Mr Davis: I cannot see the great repeal Bill interfering with Welsh legislation, but as I have said, we will talk at length to each of the devolved Administrations about issues that will affect them as a result of the Bill. We will do that before we draft it, let alone before we publish it.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): In their open letter to the Government at the weekend, the CBI and other business leaders said that it was extremely unlikely that the complex negotiations on Brexit would be completed within the two-year period stipulated in article 50. If negotiations have not been completed, what will happen then?

Mr Davis: With the best will in the world, the CBI is hypothesising. The simple truth is that we will have an unusual negotiation, because the standards that apply inside the Union will apply to us on exactly the day when we depart. That is one reason why the great repeal Bill will put the acquis communautaire straight into British law, which will make some of the transition issues quicker to deal with. I will deal with that issue if it arises, but at the moment I do not see it arising.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Does the Secretary of State not think that his party’s Back Benchers will see the irony that when they walk through the Lobby to enshrine the great repeal Bill in law in a great act of parliamentary sovereignty, they will in fact be enshrining all the hated European regulations that they have campaigned against for so many years?

Does the Secretary of State accept that sovereignty in Scotland lies with the people and not with Parliament, so it is ultimately for the people of Scotland to decide whether they remain in the United Kingdom or the European Union?

Mr Davis: I will make two points to the hon. Gentleman. First, unlike the situation prior to the passage of the great repeal Bill, we will be able to change those European laws. We are not able to do that at all at the moment.

I have forgotten what the hon. Gentleman’s other point was now. [Interruption.] Yes, Scotland. I apologise; I should not have forgotten that. The simple truth is that the decision was UK-wide, and had it gone the other way, he would not be arguing against it.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Some UK legislation for workers goes further than EU rules, but not all of it. It is also clear that European Court judgments have been far more worker-friendly than those in our own tribunals, and certainly more friendly than this Government. If the Government seriously intend to protect workers’ rights, they should adopt my Bill, which is intended to maintain EU standards for workers and their employment rights, especially those set out secondary legislation. Failing to do that would leave the door wide open for future Governments to eat into hard-fought and hard-won rights through statutory instruments. The Secretary of State claims to be a champion of workers, so will he consider introducing stand-alone legislation at the earliest opportunity to continue the protection of Britain’s workers?

Mr Davis: I hear what the hon. Lady says, but I have given an undertaking that there will be no reversal of the protection of workers’ rights, as has the Prime Minister. Indeed, my right hon. Friend has gone beyond that and said that there will be an expansion of that protection.

Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): As it stands, the steel and ceramic industries are covered by 52 separate trade defence instruments that the EU provides for this country. In negotiations taking place in conjunction with the Brexit negotiations, the Government wish to support market economy status for China. Which of the 52 trade defence mechanisms does the Secretary of State desire to keep in order to maintain the British steel industry?
Mr Davis: I will need to write to the hon. Gentleman on that serious question.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): On Saturday I met a constituent who is a member of academic staff at the University of Nottingham, one of many EU citizens living and working in our city and helping to ensure its future economic success. The Secretary of State says that he wants an outcome to the negotiations that benefits the interests of all UK citizens, and I agree. Does he agree that giving our universities and their EU staff the assurances that they seek is in our best interests—yes or no? If yes, when will he give those assurances?

Mr Davis: I have made the point already that we have duties and responsibilities to British citizens abroad as well as to EU citizens here. We seek to give the latter the best guarantees we can as soon as we can, but the answer to exactly when that will be is not solely in my hands.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): I hope that the whole House will accept the Secretary of State’s sincerity in seeking to avoid what I think he referred to as fostering divisions and creating hostility in our communities. In that context, does he believe it is appropriate for Ministers to refer to EU citizens living in the UK using terms such as “bargaining counters” and “cheap foreign labour”?

Mr Davis: I do not think I have ever referred to them in those terms—in fact, I know I have not. The simple truth is that they are not bargaining counters. One problem that would arise if we divided the two categories of EU citizens here and British citizens abroad would be that we would turn one of them into a bargaining counter, which is precisely what we are avoiding.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): Twelve weeks ago the right hon. Gentleman was a champion of the Back Bencher. Today, he says that there is no role for Back Benchers in deciding on the triggering of article 50 or the terms of the negotiation. He says, however, that he respects the role of Parliament. To show that he has not gone over to the dark side completely, will he confirm that there are no plans to include in his great repeal Bill shortcuts to repealing any protections that currently exist under EU law, and that such a change in law would require the full parliamentary process?

Mr Davis: Certainly any further changes in law will require parliamentary process. On article 50, the right hon. Lady is right that I have fought hard for the rights of Parliament with respect to the Executive, but I would never put Parliament in a position of being in a clash with the British people. That is what an article 50 vote would do.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Yesterday on “The Andrew Marr Show”, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), who is not in his place today, said: “The reason the pound keeps zooming south is that absolutely nobody has the faintest idea what exactly we’re going to put in place” for the single market. I rather got the impression from the Secretary of State earlier that he did not agree with that statement. If he does not, to what does he attribute the repeated plummeting of the pound since 24 June, and does he agree with the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone), who is no longer in his place, that it is a good thing that the pound keeps plummeting?

Mr Davis: It is an unwise Minister, particularly one who is not a Treasury Minister, who passes comment on what the right value of the pound is. There are benefits and disadvantages in movements in either direction. If we look at other countries—it is safer for me to do that—we can see that the euro is widely viewed as being undervalued for the German economy and overvalued for the Greek economy. The hon. and learned Lady can decide for herself which she prefers, but the Greek economy is in a worse state than the German economy.

I do not agree with my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke). There will definitely be very large markets for British industry after we exit the European Union. What the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) has seen on the currency markets has been a response to an article about President Hollande’s comments, massively exacerbated by program trading, which is corrected later on.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Just today, the British Retail Consortium has said that if we depend on World Trade Organisation rules, we could see price rises of 27% for meat, 16% for clothing and footwear and 14% for Chilean wine. Those are not some theoretical actions, they are price rises in the real world. Will the Secretary of State accept the reality of the damage that would be done by such price rises, and what will he do to ensure that the BRC’s predictions do not become a reality?

Mr Davis: The hon. Gentleman points out exactly why I am saying that we are seeking the best possible access that we can obtain—full stop.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Secretary of State may be interested to know that this morning Glasgow City Council launched with its partners a report on Brexit and the Glasgow economy; it is a far more comprehensive report than we received today from him. It has six key asks, among them clarity on long-term funding beyond 2020 for higher education and infrastructure. It also calls for the acceleration of the capital for the city deal for Glasgow. Will the Secretary of State confirm whether he intends to go beyond simply consulting local government on the impact of Brexit, and will he engage and actually respond to the concerns of local government, which is responsible for implementing so much of EU law?

Mr Davis: We will be engaging with local government—including on that report, I imagine. I say this to the hon. Lady, however: beyond 2020 there will be a new EU budget round. As it stands, it is not at all clear that that will be as generous as the current one. I do not think that she should extrapolate based on today’s numbers.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be aware of the importance of the life sciences and pharmaceutical industries to our economy. He will also be aware of the comments of the chief executive of AstraZeneca over the weekend, who warned that if we
are not part of the European common approvals process
the cost of drugs to the NHS will rise. Is the chief
executive of AstraZeneca right on that? If so, that is less
money for the NHS, so how much does the Secretary of
State think that is going to cost us?

Mr Davis: I am not in a position to do those sums for
the hon. Gentleman, but I will tell him that that is one
of the things that we will seek to get standardised.
There will be a number of areas such as life sciences
where we have a big interest. We are, after all, the largest
life science centre in Europe, so that will be front and
centre of our negotiations.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): When Carolyn
Fairburn of the CBI says that businesses will fear the
worst in the event of not knowing the sense of direction
of the Government, the Secretary of State should take
that seriously. If she has spent the past hour and thirty
five minutes listening to his comments she will still be
none the wiser about what the Government are trying
to achieve with the negotiations. The White Paper that
the Secretary of State suggested he would bring forward
would be a very good way of providing some certainty
to business. He has dodged the question four times, so
will he now come to the Dispatch Box and confirm
whether it is still his intention to bring forward that
White Paper, and if it is not will he tell us why?

Mr Davis: First, I spent some time talking to Ms Fairburn
a few weeks ago. She knows what the objectives are, and
they are the same as I have given here—that we get the
best possible access. I suspect that if she is asked she will
say that getting the right outcome is more important
than talking about the right outcome. That is what we
intend to do.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): As
the last man standing, what chance do I have of actually
getting anything out of the Secretary of State? He has
spent his whole life planning for this big day in the sun,
yet he is like a rabbit caught in headlights. Today’s is his
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the last man standing, what chance do I have of actually
getting anything out of the Secretary of State? He has
spent his whole life planning for this big day in the sun,
yet he is like a rabbit caught in headlights. Today’s is his

Mr Davis: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on
being the last man standing. All I will say in response to
that rant is that it is particularly ironic for the Scottish
National party of all things to say that mandate and
control do not matter.

UK Exit from the European Union: Terms
of Negotiations

Application for emergency debate (Standing Order
No. 24)

6.14 pm

Stephen Phillips (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con):
I seek leave to propose that the House should debate a
specific and important matter that should receive urgent
consideration, namely the terms upon which the
Government are proposing to conduct negotiations with
the European Commission for the exit of the United
Kingdom from the European Union.

Let me be crystal clear what the proposed debate is
not about. It is not about reversing the referendum
result. It is not about subverting the will of the majority
who voted, as I did, to leave the European Union. It is
not about trying to secure a second referendum. We had
a vote, the country voted as it did and that result must
be respected.

Personally, I had nothing whatever to do with the
leave campaign, which was, in my view, conducted in
what I regarded as a disgraceful sea of falsehood, spin
and propaganda. Like many, however, given that
fundamental reform of the EU appeared impossible I
exercised my own vote on the sure and simple basis that
the people of this country should be able to throw out
office those who make the rules that govern their
lives—in other words, I voted on the basis of sovereignty.

The Government have a mandate as a result of the
referendum to take the UK out of the European Union,
but they do not have a mandate as to the terms on
which that should be done. Nearly half of those who
voted wanted no substantive change at all in the relationship
between this country and the European Union. Their
voices, which did not chime with my own, appear entirely
to have been forgotten in the rhetoric of hard Brexit
that has somehow become received wisdom on the part of
the Government. The Government have no mandate
for that. We cannot extrapolate from the result of the
referendum the specific terms upon which the majority
of those in this country wish their relations with the
European Union now to be governed. That can only be
done by seeking a mandate from this House, to which
the citizens of this country return right hon. and hon.
Members to express their views.

The suggestion that the Government will not consult
this House and listen to the voices of those who represent
the voters of this country is fundamentally undemocratic,
is inimical to the traditions that underpin our constitution,
and in my view is wrong. It also runs contrary to the
reasons for which I and others voted as we did. I did not
vote leave to see one tyranny that failed to consult this
House, in the form of the European Commission, replaced
by another in the form of a Government who fail to
listen to what this House thinks about their negotiating
position.

Fundamentally, this House should—in my judgment,
must—be consulted by the Government through debate,
and the views of Members heard, before a decision is
made as to the broad negotiating position that should
be adopted in negotiations with the European Union.

For that reason this debate is both important and urgent.
I am thus grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for having permitted
this application to be made, and hope that both you and
the whole House are left in no doubt at all that this matter should be considered by right hon. and hon. Members at the earliest possible opportunity.

**Mr Speaker:** The hon. and learned Gentleman asks leave to propose a debate on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration, namely the terms upon which the Government are proposing to conduct negotiations with the European Commission for the exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union.

I have listened carefully to the application. I am not persuaded that this matter is proper to be discussed under Standing Order No. 24. In determining whether a matter is urgent, I am directed by Standing Order No. 24(5) to “have regard to the probability of the matter being brought before the House in time by other means.”

As of now, I have reason to expect—I believe that the hon. and learned Gentleman himself might well now be aware also—that there is a strong prospect of a debate on this matter as early as this Wednesday. Needless to say, I say to the hon. and learned Gentleman and for the benefit of the House that there will doubtless be many other opportunities to debate these matters through various vehicles in the House. It is perfectly right and proper that those various vehicles should be used as is appropriate. I am grateful to the hon. and learned Gentleman, and hope that that is clear to the House.

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**Syria**

**Application for emergency debate (Standing Order No. 24)**

6.19 pm

**Mr Andrew Mitchell** (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I seek leave to propose that the House should debate a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration, namely the unfolding humanitarian catastrophe in Aleppo and more widely across Syria.

Since the House last met, the humanitarian position in Aleppo and across Syria has deteriorated significantly, but the international community has not been successful in exercising its duties to protect innocent civilians—duties clearly identified and understood throughout the United Nations and in our responsibility to protect. On 19 September, a United Nations relief convoy was destroyed in the early evening. Thirty-one trucks loaded with food and medicines were attacked from the air. Warehouses and clinics were severely damaged and 18 humanitarian workers were killed. This is undoubtedly a war crime and it was undoubtedly perpetrated by Russian forces.

In the last three days, 100 war wounded have been attended to in Aleppo. There have been 12 bombing runs and many people, including children, seriously injured, and at lunchtime today in Aleppo at least five people died as a result of a Government rocket attack.

When it comes to incendiary weapons and munitions such as bunker buster bombs and cluster bombs, the UN makes it clear that the systematic use of such indiscriminate weapons in densely populated areas amounts to a war crime. We are witnessing events that match the behaviour of the Nazi regime in Guernica in Spain. Russia is shredding the international rules-based system of law, destroying the United Nations and its ability to act in the same way that the Germans and the Italians destroyed the League of Nations in the 1930s.

I ask, Mr Speaker, that you allow urgent consideration by this House of what more the Government could be doing to protect the mass of humanity that is suffering in and around Syria today, how we can do more to support the International Syria Support Group, what more can be done to secure access and safety for humanitarian workers, what further steps we can take with our allies to support future cessation of hostilities and how, working with our allies in the United Nations, Europe and NATO, we can discharge our responsibility to protect.

**Mr Speaker:** I have listened carefully to the application from the right hon. Gentleman and I am satisfied that the matter raised by him is proper to be discussed under Standing Order No. 24. Does the right hon. Gentleman have the leave of the House?

*Application agreed to.*

**Mr Speaker:** The right hon. Gentleman has obtained the leave of the House. The debate will be held tomorrow, Tuesday 11 October, as the first item of public business. The debate will last for three hours and will arise on a motion that the House has considered the specified matter set out in the right hon. Gentleman’s application.

Members leaving the Chamber after these substantial exchanges should do so quickly and quietly. There is a point of order on its way and I wish to hear it.
Point of Order

6.24 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Last Thursday on “Question Time”, in an exchange with Leanne Wood, the leader of Plaid Cymru, the Secretary of State for Wales said, first, that “when there’s…migration into Welsh-speaking communities…your members have taken direct action in the past”;

secondly, that there are “communities in Wales where there are nationalist activists who take direct action against people who come in”;

and thirdly:

“It wasn’t so long ago that some of the cottages were being burned down”.

Despite many requests to the Secretary of State, he has failed to provide any evidence for this. Neither has he withdrawn his accusations or apologised.

People throughout Wales are outraged at these slurs on their communities, but for us today the Secretary of State’s accusations relate to Plaid Cymru Members. I am a Plaid Cymru Member. Is he accusing me? Or is he accusing my hon. Friend the Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) or my hon. Friend the Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), English by birth and bought up in Eltham in London? Bizarrely, he might even be accusing his own Under-Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Aberconwy (Guto Bebb), who previously was a prominent and vocal member of Plaid Cymru. Mr Speaker, what action can be taken in respect of those who, outside this Chamber, baselessly bring Members of this House into disrepute?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for notice of his point of order. However, the “Question Time” to which he refers is on the BBC, not in the House of Commons. While my responsibility extends to the latter, it does not do so in respect of the former, as I dare say he knows very well. None the less, his views are on the record. I do not treat what he has said in any way with levity or disinterest, but as a matter of fact it does not fall within the remit of the Chair to handle. We shall have to leave it there for now. I thank the hon. Gentleman for registering his views on the record.

Privileges

6.26 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Lidington): I beg to move,

That this House—

(1) approves the Second Report of the Committee on Privileges (House of Commons Paper No. 672);

(2) endorses the recommendation in paragraph 12; and

(3) accordingly suspends Justin Tomlinson from the service of the House for a period of two sitting days, beginning on Tuesday 11 October.

The facts of this case are set out in the Privileges Committee report and the report published by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards. My hon. Friend the Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) was found to have shared a draft report by the Committee of Public Accounts with an outside party in breach of the confidentiality rules. The Privileges Committee concluded that my hon. Friend committed a contempt in disclosing a draft Committee report to a third party and that his actions constituted substantial interference in the work of that Committee. His co-operation throughout the relevant inquiries was noted by the Committee, which also made reference to the fact that he was not motivated in his actions by financial gain.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his personal statement of 15 September, in which he accepted in full the findings of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, took full responsibility for his actions and made his apology to the House. I invite hon. Members to endorse the findings of the Privileges Committee.

6.28 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for his statement. On this, my first appearance as shadow Leader of the House, I would also like to thank my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn), for his hard work. I agree with the Leader of the House and add my thanks to the Privileges Committee and the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards for their work and diligence in coming to their conclusion.

The hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) made a personal statement on 15 September, at the earliest opportunity. He indicated that he was naive. However, the draft report was sent to the company that was under investigation by the Public Accounts Committee and, as the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards said in paragraph 40 of her report, it gave the company “an additional opportunity, not available to or known to anyone else, to influence the recommendations of the Committee.”

In my experience, Committee Clerks are assiduous in stating on the draft report that it is confidential, and the copies produced are numbered and password protected. It is alarming to other members of a Committee when a draft report is leaked. It undermines the Committee process and, as “Erskine May” says, may be a contempt. In this case it was found to be a contempt.

Perhaps I could make a suggestion that when new Members join a Select Committee, and at the same time as they declare their interests, they are reminded of the confidential nature of draft reports and discussions.
It is normal practice to agree with the reports of the Privileges Committee. The Opposition therefore support the motion.

6.30 pm

Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): This case came to light when Wonga contacted the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards in June 2015 to say that it had evidence that appeared to show that two years earlier the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson) had provided a draft report by the Committee of Public Accounts to a Wonga employee and given that employee a chance to comment on the draft. The commissioner rightly referred to the matter to the Committee of Public Accounts, which conducted its own initial investigation and published a special report that concluded that the disclosure of the draft report by the hon. Member constituted a substantial interference in the work of the Committee. It is for the Privileges Committee to investigate such allegations, but we felt that in this case there were complications which made it desirable to ask the commissioner to conduct an investigation on our behalf. Not least among the reasons for this were media allegations that the hon. Gentleman had benefited financially from his actions. I wish to stress from the start that those allegations were unsubstantiated and were dismissed by the commissioner as groundless. The Privileges Committee agrees completely with that finding.

The commissioner reported to the Standards Committee, as required under Standing Orders. In view of her conclusions that the case touched on matters of privilege, the Committee referred the commissioner's report to us for adjudication. On behalf of the Privileges Committee, I thank the commissioner for her thorough investigation and the Standards Committee for its co-operation.

There have been three separate inquiries into the allegations and at each stage the hon. Gentleman made no attempt to deny his role in these events. Instead, he has continually apologised unreservedly. Our role on the Privileges Committee is therefore less concerned with what happened. Clearly, the hon. Gentleman disclosed the draft report without authority and therefore committed a contempt of the House. I am more concerned about what sanctions should be applied as a result.

In 2008, the then Standards and Privileges Committee concluded that the unauthorised disclosure of a draft report or of advice to a Select Committee not only betrays confidence but can damage trust between Members, and between those who work for or with them. It also undermines the effectiveness of the Committee's work. Leaking is a reprehensible act. In any case, where the Committee is able to discover the source of a leak it will be prepared to recommend appropriately severe sanctions. There is no doubt that the hon. Gentleman's actions did have a significant effect on the work of the Committee and so more than an apology is in order. We now turn to mitigating factors.

The Privileges Committee explored with the hon. Gentleman his motives for sharing the draft report and his grasp of the confidential nature of such documents at the time he committed the contempt. It was clear to the Committee that he did not act out of financial gain and was not seeking to ensure that the views of Wonga were written into the report. Instead, this was part of a long-running campaign he had led against payday lenders. He described his actions as the result of his own naiveté and stupidity. We accept that this was the case. We also accept the sincerity of his apologies and have borne in mind his full co-operation with all the inquiries into his behaviour.

Turning to sanctions, there are few precedents for this kind of case. In 1999, there were two cases involving the passing on of draft reports to the Government, which we consider to be more serious than the circumstances we are currently examining. In those cases, one Member was suspended for 10 sitting days and another was suspended for five sitting days. Bearing in mind the mitigating factors above, but also the undoubted seriousness of the offence in the hon. Gentleman's case, we have recommended a personal statement to the House and a suspension for two sitting days. The hon. Member made a personal statement at the first possible opportunity: on the day the report was published. I ask the House today to approve our recommendation on suspension as proportionate to the offence and as a clear message to others inside and outside the House that leaking Select Committee papers is wrong and will be met with appropriate sanctions where the source of the leak is identified.

Question put and agreed to.
Neighbourhood Planning Bill

Second Reading

6.34 pm

The Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Sajid Javid): I beg to move. That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I welcome the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce) to her new position. I wish her and her team all the very best.

I have been a Member of this House for six-and-a-half years. In the countless contacts I have had with my constituents over that time, one issue has come up more often and more consistently than any other: housing. I am sure other hon. Members would say the same.

My two Conservative predecessors at the Department for Communities and Local Government did more to reform planning than all their Labour counterparts combined. More than 1,000 pages of policy was reduced to just 50 and the Housing and Planning Act 2016 did much to streamline and speed up the process. It is a record of real action and real change that is already delivered than in any year since records began. Almost 900,000 new homes have been delivered in England alone since the start of 2010.

As I said just last week, however, there is much more to do. The Prime Minister has been absolutely clear since the start of 2010. There are two areas the Bill does not cover that I think so much of the dealings we have with our constituents. There are two areas the Bill does not cover that I think so much of the dealings we have with our constituents.

Sir Edward Garnier (Harborough) (Con): I am most grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way so early. He is quite right about the inbox: this subject dominates so much of the dealings we have with our constituents.

As I said just last week, however, there is much more to do. The Prime Minister has been absolutely clear that, if we are going to build a Britain that works for everyone, we need a housing market that works for everyone. That means doing still more to tackle the housing shortage by giving communities greater certainty over development and reducing the time it takes to get from planning permission to completion. This Bill will help us to do just that.

Sajid Javid: The right hon. Gentleman will know that several initiatives are already in place to make sure that new development is sustainable. A review is looking at what further measures we could take.

Neighbourhood plans are a key part of the Bill. Not all planning takes place at local authority level. Neighbourhood development plans, which were introduced in 2011, have proved to be extremely effective. Far from being a so-called nimby’s charter, some neighbourhood groups with plans in force have planned for housing numbers above the number set by the local authority for that area. Those communities have, on average, planned for 10% more homes. Neighbourhood planning gives residents and businesses greater certainty about developments in their area, ensuring that they have a choice on how best to meet local housing needs.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): The Bill contains some excellent provisions on neighbourhood planning, but neighbourhood plans are predicated on a local plan being in place. I represent two authorities: one has a local plan and the other does not. Will the Secretary of State, either through the Bill or otherwise, take strong action against those authorities that do not have a local plan in place?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. and learned Friend makes the right point last week in my party conference speech. It is something on which we will be taking further action.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Just before the Secretary of State responds, my patience with and tolerance of the extremely long intervention by the right hon. and learned Gentleman is not to be taken as a precedent.

Sajid Javid: My right hon. and learned Friend makes some very good points. The first part of his question was whether we might be able to take some of them into account in the Bill. I anticipate that at some point there will very likely be some amendments to the Bill. If that is the case, they will of course be discussed properly at that time. He made some suggestions that I will think about carefully, in particular regarding what some people call “landbanking” by certain developers. I talked about that very important point last week in my party conference speech. It is something on which we will be taking further action.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): Might the Secretary of State also consider amendments that focus on the sustainability of new housing, in particular moving towards carbon-neutral housing, which also has the benefit of reducing cost to occupiers because of lower energy costs?

Sajid Javid: My right hon. and learned Friend makes the right point last week in my party conference speech. It is something on which we will be taking further action.
Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): The introduction to the Bill says that one of its central aims is strengthening neighbourhood planning and giving local people more certainty over where homes will be built in their area. The Minister for Housing and Planning has said that putting power into the hands of local people to decide where development occurs is a key objective. The Secretary of State will be aware that Birmingham’s Labour council wishes to build 6,000 homes on the Sutton Coldfield green belt and no account has been taken of the virtually unanimous opposition of the royal town’s 100,000 residents, who have been completely disfranchised. Will he agree to take account of the unanimous view of the newly elected Sutton Coldfield town council, who are adamantly opposed to this on behalf of the 100,000 people they represent?

Sajid Javid

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I have already made it clear that the first long intervention was not to be a precedent. This second long intervention is definitely not a precedent. I have been patient because this is the first day back, but perhaps Members who have served several decades in the House have forgotten that interventions have to be short. We have many Members wishing to speak this evening and I will have to impose a time limit, so it is simply wrong for interventions to take so long. Short interventions make good debate!

Sajid Javid: My right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) has spoken passionately about this issue before. I listened to him then and I have just listened to him again, and I will of course reflect on what he has said. I am sure he will understand that it would not be appropriate for me to talk about a specific plan that has been duly endorsed by said authority?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman will know that once a neighbourhood plan is adopted, it becomes statutory and is taken into account when planning decisions are made. It is not a question of a local authority overruling a neighbourhood plan; once it is adopted, it is part of the local plan, so they are part of the same package, when it comes to making those decisions. Local authorities do not have the right to overrule a plan once it has been adopted.

Local and neighbourhood plans are vital tools for delivering new planning permissions. If we are to tackle the housing deficit, it is crucial that shovels hit the ground as soon as possible once permission has been granted for a development. There are a number of reasons why that does not always happen. One is because too many planning authorities impose too many pre-commencement conditions that unreasonable barriers to building. Not only do they delay the delivery of much-needed houses, but they create cash-flow issues for builders—something that is particularly problematic for smaller builders and new entrants to the market. To tackle this, the Bill reflects best practice by stopping pre-commencement conditions being imposed without the written agreement of the applicant. It will also create a power to restrict the use of certain other types of planning conditions that do not meet the well-established policy tests in the national planning policy framework. We are currently seeking views on both measures in a consultation paper published by my Department last month.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for taking a short lawyer’s intervention. When he is consulting on planning obligations, will he also consult on the option that was considered in the Housing and Planning Act 2016: the ability for local authorities to buy their own land with planning obligations, as the local planning authority? That would greatly speed up the redevelopment process in urban areas.

Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend speaks with great experience on this subject, and it is something that I will consider.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): Should the Bill become an Act, will there be any circumstances in which a local authority can overrule a neighbourhood development plan that has been duly endorsed by said authority?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman may be aware that for a neighbourhood plan to become effective it needs to be adopted. It will be looked at by the inspector and a local referendum will be held. As I mentioned earlier, some 240 plans have gone through that process and, when that happens, they need to be given due weight in the consideration of planning decisions.

John Mann: I thank the Secretary of State for giving way again. He will know that Bassetlaw has more local plans in process and agreed than anywhere else, so we do know a little bit about them. If he is saying that a local council or the Secretary of State can decide to overrule a local community that has been through a huge, state-funded consultation, had a referendum and decided where the housing will go, what is the point?

Sajid Javid: The hon. Gentleman will know that once a neighbourhood plan is adopted, it becomes statutory and is taken into account when planning decisions are made. It is not a question of a local authority overruling a neighbourhood plan; once it is adopted, it is part of the local plan, so they are part of the same package, when it comes to making those decisions. Local authorities do not have the right to overrule a plan once it has been adopted.

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Sajid Javid: My hon. Friend speaks with great experience on this subject, and it is something that I will consider.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend ensure that the changes to pre-commencement regulations will not mean that developers will not be held to their obligations to develop the infrastructure...
surrounding new housing? It is often a real challenge for local communities if that is not delivered in a timely way.

*Sajid Javid:* I can assure my hon. Friend that the provisions will not mean that happens. Developers will still have clear obligations, and this process will ensure that they will be held to them.

The system of permitted development rights already offers a rapid means of turning commercial premises into much-needed homes. However, we lack accurate and precise data on how many homes are created in this way, which makes it all the harder to build the right number of homes in the right areas, so the Bill will create a requirement to record on the planning register certain applications made under permitted development rights. Collecting these data will bring more facts to the national conversation on house building, help communities to develop neighbourhood plans, and help planning authorities and inspectors to make informed, appropriate decisions. Such a move is long overdue.

*Mr Steve Baker* (Wycombe) (Con): Before my right hon. Friend moves on, may I ask whether he will use this Bill to clarify an issue that is much discussed in Wycombe: the status of green-belt land? Is it sacrosanct, or should local authorities review it with a view to getting their local plans through the inspector, who I am told will not pass local plans unless the green belt has been reviewed?

*Sajid Javid:* The Bill does not look at green-belt issues, and it does not change in any way the very important protections for the green belt. As my hon. Friend will know, green-belt development can be looked at only in the most exceptional circumstances, and the Bill will not change that.

*Richard Drax* (South Dorset) (Con): Before my right hon. Friend moves on, I was wondering whether he would mention the privatisation of the Land Registry. I understood that that was to have been done under the Bill, but that no decision was taken, and that the issue was, in effect, kicked into the long grass. Has privatisation of the Land Registry gone? Could it be brought back? Where are the Government on the issue?

*Sajid Javid:* As my hon. Friend has rightly identified, measures on the Land Registry are not part of the Bill, and the decision on privatisation will be for the Government to make in the future; it will not form part of this Bill, nor will it be introduced into the Bill in any shape or form at a later date.

Part 2 concerns compulsory purchase. In an ideal world, such a process would not exist. I would always prefer to see agreement secured through negotiation. However, as a last resort, we all know that it is sometimes necessary, and when that is the case, it is right that the process operates clearly, quickly and, above all, fairly. That does not always happen. Part of the problem is that the process is governed by a complex patchwork of statute and case law that has built up over many years. This slows the process down, increases costs, and bewilders individuals who are caught up in it. Ultimately, it benefits nobody—with the possible exception of lawyers. Clauses 9 to 30 will tackle these issues, making the system more effective, more transparent, cheaper and easier to navigate. Untying the tangle of red tape will speed up the process.

Once again, this will mean more homes—and the infrastructure that is required to support them—getting built more quickly.

*Liz Saville Roberts* (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): On the compulsory purchase clauses, what action have the Government taken adequately to consult with Welsh stakeholders, and to learn the lessons of the Housing and Planning Act 2016, given that the Assembly voted down a legislative consent motion relating to the Act on the grounds of insufficient consultation with Welsh stakeholders?

*Sajid Javid:* The hon. Lady will know that there has been widespread discussion, and we are still in discussions with the Wales Office and Welsh stakeholders on the issue that she raises.

The first set of provisions will make the process of compulsory purchase clearer. They include consistent rules for temporary possession of land where a permanent compulsory purchase is not required, giving all relevant bodies the same powers. The Bill also establishes a clear and coherent framework for compensation in such cases, filling a long-standing gap in the law and ensuring that all landowners are treated fairly. It sets out exactly what a property owner’s rights and options are when faced with a temporary possession; it is the first time that has been enshrined in primary legislation. The Bill also provides a clearer way to identify market value, making it quicker and easier to agree compensation.

At the moment, the price paid for property subject to compulsory purchase is assessed in the so-called “no scheme world”. This is the market value of land if there were no threat of compulsory purchase, not taking account of any increase or decrease caused by the scheme. The no scheme world is a mixture of obscurely worded statute and over 100 years of sometimes conflicting case law. This Bill brings things up to date; it clarifies and codifies the no scheme world, without altering its core principles, to provide a clearer starting point for all compensation payments.

The new provisions put mayoral development corporations on the same footing as new town and urban development corporations for the purposes of assessing compensation, and extend the definition of “scheme” in those limited circumstances in which regeneration is enabled by a transport project. The Bill repeals redundant legislation that allowed additional compensation to be negotiated after the original settlement. This will further reduce the potential for confusion and uncertainty.

The next set of provisions make the process faster. They create a statutory deadline for bringing confirmed compulsory purchase orders into effect. They also allow Transport for London and the Greater London Authority to make a single, overarching compulsory purchase order for transport and regeneration purposes. At present, they have to artificially divide projects and run parallel processes. This causes unnecessary cost, confusion and delay to much-needed development.

The final clauses will make compulsory purchase fairer. In particular, they ensure that where property is acquired by compulsion, the compensation entitlement is fair to all business tenants occupying the property. They will align the disturbance compensation entitlement of businesses with minor or unprotected tenancies with the more generous entitlement of licensees.
There are already many excellent examples of local authorities working together to meet the housing needs of their areas. Through devolution deals, we have seen combined authorities’ ambitions to bring forward strategic plans that address the needs of real-world communities, rather than of administrative divisions. I want to see more of this. I want more joint planning, more tiers of government working together and, of course, more plans put in place. I want all areas to have one. Failing to put a plan in place creates uncertainty among communities, who are left with no idea of what will be built where, and it creates resentment when developments are eventually imposed through speculative applications.

The House will not be surprised to learn that I agree with the central thrust of the local plans expert group’s recommendations in this area. We need more co-operation and joint planning. The requirement to have a plan should not be in doubt, and the process for putting a plan in place needs to be streamlined. As the expert group set out, most of those changes can and should be made through national policy and guidance, rather than through primary legislation. Should primary legislation be required, I look to use this Bill as the vehicle for it. If combined authorities’ ambitions to bring forward strategic plans for their areas. Through devolution deals, we have seen authorities working together to meet the housing needs of their areas.

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In conclusion, we have a nationwide shortage of high-quality, secure, affordable housing. To tackle this, we need new ideas, new policies and new legislation. This Bill provides a solid foundation on which to build. The Bill gives greater responsibility to local communities, letting them decide what sort of development they should have, and where it should take place. It removes more of the red tape that all too often delays construction. It gives us more of the data we need to make informed decisions about planning, and brings the compulsory purchase system firmly into the 21st century, turning it into a well-tuned machine for making development happen. Moreover, the Bill has been welcomed by the British Property Federation, the Royal Town Planning Institute and many others. Above all, the Bill will make it easier to build the homes that our children and grandchildren are crying out for. That is why I am delighted to commend it to the House.

6.58 pm

Teresa Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): I would like to put on record my thanks to the Secretary of State for his warm welcome.

The Neighbourhood Planning Bill does not appear at first glance to be a controversial one. Indeed, it includes many measures that we support. There are, however, elements of the Bill that could be strengthened or amended, so it was good to hear the Secretary of State say that he might be open to amendments in Committee. Labour Members will support appropriate measures that seek to streamline the delivery of much-needed new homes and further engage local people in the shaping of their communities.

We urgently need new homes, so it is a shame that the Bill misses measures to achieve what was announced in the Queen’s Speech in May, namely putting the National Infrastructure Commission on a statutory footing. However, we are pleased that, following pressure from both sides of the House, the unnecessary step to privatise the Land Registry has been dropped. That has been warmly welcomed by almost everybody in the housing sector, but the Bill must be seen in context, and it cannot be detached from the wider housing crisis we currently face.

The Government say that the aim of the Bill is to free up more land for new housing and to expedite the beginning of building once planning permission has been granted. We face the biggest housing crisis in a generation and urgently need more homes, and the Bill does not go far enough to provide them. The Bill could do so much more to encourage development and engage local residents in the process.

The Bill introduces measures in four key areas: neighbourhood planning, planning conditions, the planning register and compulsory purchase orders. The proposals on neighbourhood planning will allow neighbourhood plans to influence the planning process at an earlier stage, and will help to streamline the making and revision of neighbourhood plans. We support measures to streamline neighbourhood planning and to promote the ability of local residents to participate, but the Bill raises a number of questions. First, as the British Property Federation has noted, greater clarity is needed on the level and weight attributed to neighbourhood plans at every stage of their preparation. For example, more clarity is needed on whether a general direction of travel of a neighbourhood plan would be considered in the determination of a planning application.

Secondly, there is huge concern surrounding resources and the impact that the measure will have on our already stretched local planning authorities. Many of them already lack the resources they need to promote quality placemaking. The new measures make significant demands in terms of time and resources, and many planning departments are working on local plans before the deadline next year. How will the Minister ensure that they will be able to resource both adequately? Local authorities have a statutory duty to support neighbourhood planning groups and to provide a local plan. That could present problems for smaller district councils that have limited resources and capacity to respond to multiple pressures.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Teresa Pearce: I would rather not give way because many hon. Members want to speak and we are short of time.

The Bill needs further measures to clarify the true costs of neighbourhood plans. Currently, councils receive £5,000 for each neighbourhood plan area designated, and £20,000 for each neighbourhood plan referendum, but those figures are the same regardless of the number of electors or the complexity or size of the neighbourhood plan. The costs can exceed the moneys that the council receives.

In addition, neighbourhood planning must be open to all, and disadvantaged communities need to be able to participate. Neighbourhood planning comes with complexities and can require professional support. Planning Aid England and the RTPI help to support groups across the country pro bono, but the Government should adequately support local planning authorities and local communities to shape development in their areas.
The Bill allows the Secretary of State to prescribe when councils should review their statement of community involvement, but why are local councils, which understand their communities and can respond directly to local needs, not trusted to decide when to review their statements of community involvement? Why cannot that be decided at local level rather than being imposed from above? A better balance can be achieved, possibly through amendments in Committee.

The British Property Federation has made a number of recommendations on neighbourhood planning that the Government have failed to explore, including ensuring that neighbourhood plans are consistent with and conform to the national planning policy framework, and setting a minimum turnout threshold in referendums on the adoption of neighbourhood plans. I would be interested to hear whether the Minister is receptive to those suggestions.

The greatest concern in the Bill is on pre-commencement planning conditions. Councils approve almost nine of every 10 planning applications and there is little evidence to suggest that development is being delayed by pre-commencement planning conditions. There has been a cautious reception for the Bill from the sector. London Councils has said that there is little robust evidence to support the current planning conditions system has led to an under-supply of housing.

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Gavin Barwell: Before being elected to the House, I ran a business that financed construction projects. I have to tell the hon. Lady that people engaged in such projects frequently complain about the onerous conditions. To give one example, they complain about the requirement to have a bat survey.

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): And newts!

Chris Philp: And newt surveys. Such surveys can be done only at certain times of the year. That is a very onerous and often very serious set of conditions.

Teresa Pearce: I am very interested in the hon. Gentleman’s previous employment, but people always complain about restrictions. Our job is to balance the complaints of the developer against what is best for a local community. I am yet to see firm statistical evidence of how much pre-commencement planning conditions restrict building.

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Teresa Pearce: I will give way one more time, but we really must get on.

Gavin Barwell: If the hon. Lady is not inclined necessarily to listen to the voice of developers, may I refer her to the representations all hon. Members have received from the District Councils Network? It states: “The DCN has acknowledged that the discharge of planning conditions can be a factor in slow decision making and supports the government in seeking to address conditions.”

Teresa Pearce: I thank the Minister for his intervention but I would like to see real statistical evidence. Are we trying to solve a problem that does not exist? We all have anecdotal evidence, but perhaps in Committee we will see more evidence.

It is my experience that some developers welcome pre-commencement planning conditions because they enable planning permission to be secured without finalising the full details. It can save work duplication, for example, a developer may not wish to spend significant amounts of time deciding between different types of render for the outside of a development when they know it could be agreed at a later date. Indeed, a condition could be established in the consent to match the local area and street scene.

London Councils says that the measure will put considerable strain on the resources of local planning authorities. It proposes that a better solution would be to promote best practice in pre-application discussions between developers and local planning authorities. There are questions on the process. For example, what if late representations are received, and what if a councillor wishes to add a pre-commencement condition on the night of the planning committee?

Behind that lies the fact that pre-commencement planning conditions are not a bad thing. They have an important role in securing sustainable development that is careful and considerate of local communities. Conditions should be imposed only when consent would not be acceptable without them. By allowing room for negotiation, we are changing the nature of how conditions are set and their purpose. We could inadvertently either encourage inappropriate development by lowering our standards of acceptable development or, when disagreement arises between applicant and planning authority, discourage developers from building, which no hon. Member wants. There are questions about whether the measure is necessary. I look forward to seeing the stats behind it to show that it is. There is an existing framework for applicants to appeal specific conditions that they consider do not meet the national policy tests.

If we are to proceed, it is essential to ensure that the Bill does not have unintended negative consequences. Greater clarity is needed on appeal routes when agreement cannot be reached, and on pre-completion and pre-occupation conditions. It is right that there is a public consultation, but even if the Bill becomes law, I do not anticipate it adding any of the extra homes that we urgently need. It is not pre-commencement planning conditions that slow planning consent, but the chronic underfunding of local planning authorities. It is not pre-commencement planning conditions that slow construction, but the drastic skills shortage in the construction sector. It is not pre-commencement planning conditions that slow new schemes coming forward, but the lack of strategic infrastructure involvement.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Teresa Pearce: I am afraid I need to move on because many hon. Members wish to speak and the hour is late. [Interruption. ] There are lots of Government Members.

The Bill makes provision for permitted development to be recorded on the planning register. Given the existing pressures and further commitments in the Bill—I have mentioned the wider question of resourcing—I should like the Minister to consider the funding of planning authorities. When local authorities are pressed for resources—they must decide, for example, between child protection and adult social services—planning is often squeezed.
The Bill attempts to streamline compulsory purchase powers, and includes temporary possession of land to enable schemes to store equipment and machinery so that they can be delivered. The temporary possession of land has been used widely in my constituency under the Crossrail Act 2008. The proposed changes to compulsory purchase orders would enable councils to capture the value from increased land prices to invest in the local infrastructure needed to complement and facilitate new housing schemes. While that can accelerate development, CPOs still require approval from the Secretary of State. Nevertheless, it is hoped that those measures will help to encourage development.

Perhaps the most striking thing about the Bill is what is not in it. Along with the Local Government Association and others, we welcome the news that the Government have not included the planned privatisation of the Land Registry. Will the Minister clarify whether the initiative has not included the planned privatisation of the Land Registry. Will the Minister clarify whether the initiative is not in it. Along with the Local Government Association to encourage development.

Nevertheless, it is hoped that those measures will help to accelerate development.

The Bill is quite different from the measure outlined in the Queen’s Speech earlier this year. The Prime Minister said in her conference speech last week, “something...we need to do: take big, sometimes even controversial, decisions about our country’s infrastructure.”

However, in the Bill, the Government’s proposal to place the National Infrastructure Commission on a statutory footing has been withdrawn. I hope that the Government will think again.

The Bill aims to build houses, but it does nothing to build communities. The failure to provide the commission with statutory powers to enable strategic decision making on infrastructure is a missed opportunity to tackle the housing crisis. The House Builders Association, which represents small and medium-sized builders, said that the Bill was unlikely meaningfully to increase supply.

This is the sixth piece of legislation in the past six years to make provision for planning. Another Bill passes and the Government fail adequately to resource planning departments, which have faced a 46% cut in funding over the past five years. A recent survey by the British Property Federation identified under-resourcing as the primary cause of delays to development. Another Bill passes, and the Government fail to increase the transparency of viability assessments, which many people believe is the key to ensuring that there is sufficient and appropriate affordable housing. Another Bill passes and we are no closer to developing garden cities and new towns, which we need to build to ensure that our children and our children’s children can find a home of their own.

The Bill will not deliver social housing and the genuinely affordable homes that are desperately needed. It will not provide facilities on new housing developments that are required to build communities, and it is unlikely to facilitate opportunities for the struggling SME builder, or tackle the growing skills crisis in the construction sector. The Bill has failed to tackle those issues, but I am interested to hear the Minister say that there is an appetite to look at the Bill and perhaps amend it in Committee. If it is not amended, the missed opportunity will manifest itself in a continued housing crisis until the Government can step up and match their rhetoric with substance.

[ Teresa Pearce ]

Sir Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) (Con): I have to admit that I did not expect to be stirred by the statements of the shadow Secretary of State, but her remarks about clause 7 would strike anyone who has been engaged with the planning system over the past many years as quite extraordinary. Pre-commencement conditions imposed by local authorities are a major cause of delay and also distract the officials who she complained were underfunded. One reason why they are over-occupied is that they are too preoccupied issuing absurd pre-commencement conditions that are not properly enforced and lead to massive delays in the process. I warmly welcome clause 7, and hope that the regulations introduced by the Secretary of State will be extremely strong on that issue and will be accompanied by measures to enable us to do in parallel what is currently done in sequence. It takes about two years on average from the time of the first application to the actual completion of homes. Other countries manage that in a year or less, and we could too if processes that are currently done repetitively and in sequence were done in parallel and singly. I hope that we will see those regulations as the Bill proceeds.

Those of us who have been involved with neighbourhood planning since the Conservatives first introduced the proposals—amazingly, nine years ago—are conscious of its huge success. We were told at the beginning that it would be a nimby’s charter, as the Secretary of State rightly mentioned. We were told by others that it would never grip the nation and that there would not really be any neighbourhood plans, but we find that they have been introduced in some 2,000 places. Judging by my constituency, that is the beginning of a tidal wave: more than half the villages of West Dorset intend to engage in neighbourhood planning, and that is increasingly the case for the towns as well. There is no doubt, as the Secretary of State rightly said, that the measure is far from being a nimby’s charter, but as communities engage in neighbourhood planning they wrestle with two conflicting issues: their desire to preserve the look and feel of the places in which they live, which is a reasonable human desire; and the desire that their children and grandchildren should be able to find a home in the locality. I do not know whether the Secretary of State has experienced this, but people have come to my constituency surgery in tears because they could not get a foot on the housing ladder. I cannot remember another subject that has provoked that kind of emotional intensity. For families who have grown up, in some cases over hundreds of years, in small villages where they simply have not been able to build, this is liberation. It has been brought about by neighbourhood planning, because the community feels that it can control the shape and character of what is built so that it is appropriate to the location. That is not something that can be judged from miles away: it is judged on the spot by the locals, and it is a huge success. I therefore warmly welcome clauses 1, 2 and 5, which are the guts of the Bill.

I want to make a few observations about things that I hope can be developed in Committee and on Report. Clause 5 deals with assistance for neighbourhood plans. I had hoped that it would be a little stronger and more meaningful. It simply requires local authorities to produce an explanation of what they will do to support neighbourhood planning. That is fine—there is nothing wrong with that at all—but I know local authorities,
and I suspect that the Department does too, that will write any number of plans and do absolutely nothing. What is needed is the ability for neighbourhoods—in some cases, hard-pressed neighbourhoods that do not have much money; in other cases, neighbourhoods that are small parishes that do not have much money—to get on with the job of neighbourhood planning. I do not think that anyone can expect the public purse to meet those costs, so we need to examine the proposal introduced by the National Association of Local Councils for more of the community infrastructure levy to be devoted to neighbourhood plans, at least when they introduce local development orders, which are extremely effective. We should also look at the possibility of a loan arrangement, in which money from the community infrastructure levy for a neighbourhood plan is used to repay or defray the costs of engaging in the exercise.

It is not a simple exercise. In most neighbourhoods that I have visited up and down the country, and in my own constituency, hundreds of people get involved and it is quite a management exercise. Neighbourhoods can only do it if they employ one or two people who can put the vision up on the board, explain what is proposed, and go through the detailed process—the examination, the evidence, and so on—which requires up-front funding. I hope that that can be looked at.

Finally, clauses 1 and 2 are long overdue. In retrospect, we should have introduced them right at the beginning, in the 2010 legislation. My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) and I were both involved in that, and it is great to see weight being given to post-examination, as in clause 1, and it is absolutely right that post-referendum neighbourhood plans should go into local development plans even if the local authority does not, for one reason or another, complete the task of introducing them. That is an excellent provision in clause 2. However, my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) made a point that is highly relevant. As the Secretary of State said, there are too many local authorities that have not yet introduced new-style local development plans. Unless the neighbourhood plan is couched in terms of a new-style local development plan with a proper strategic grip it is impossible to formulate the right kind of neighbourhood plan, which must conform to the strategic considerations of the local development plan. In some cases, I fear, local authorities have discovered that they can stymie the ability of neighbourhoods to produce neighbourhood plans simply by being recalcitrant about producing new-style development plans.

Given that, in clause 7, the Secretary of State is rightly taking powers to make regulations relating to pre-commencement conditions, I think he should at least consider the possibility of taking further powers to force local authorities to produce new-style local development plans, or else simply to allow a neighbourhood plan to stand in as the development plan for that neighbourhood, sui generis. Either would do, but I think that something must be done to address the problem raised by my hon. Friend.

Having said that, I will end by saying that the Bill is a progressive piece of legislation which should be welcomed throughout the House and throughout the country, because it may help our children and grandchildren to have the homes that they need.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I must congratulate the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) on a perfect speech. In my opinion, of course, the content does not count; what counts is merely the length, in precise minutes. I was about to say to the House—but the right hon. Gentleman has illustrated my point perfectly—that if everyone who wishes to take part in the debate speaks for between seven and eight minutes, as the right hon. Gentleman has just done, everyone will have the opportunity to speak, and there will be no need for a formal time limit. If Members do not stick to a self-imposed time limit, there will be a formal time limit, which makes for much less easy-flowing debate.

7.21 pm

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): Before I express my agreement with the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) on one important point, let me congratulate the Secretary of State on his brilliant campaign 18 months ago to stop the development of more than 2,000 houses, which was well advertised in his local newspaper. He is truly the king of the nimby—or, as some would say, he is backing his constituents and his local communities. That contrasts slightly with the message that I understand him to have conveyed somewhere last week when he was attacking the nimbys, because over the past two or three years, following his successful campaign, he has been the greatest of all the nimbys in the House.

I should like to see precisely what the right hon. Member for West Dorset proposed. If a neighbourhood goes through the pain and democracy of agreeing on where more houses should be built in its community, which is part of the requirement of a neighbourhood development plan, and if that is agreed by referendum and endorsed by the local council, it should not be possible to overrule such a level of democracy; but it is.

For example, at the most recent planning committee meeting in the Sturton ward in Bassetlaw, which I know extremely well, the neighbourhood development plan was overruled because the planning officers pointed to the Government’s five-year housing land supply, as identified by the development plans. They said, ‘You’ve got to have this plan; you’ve got to have this.” In other words, they said, “You have a plan. You have specified where the housing should be, and what type of housing it should be. A huge number of members of the community participated in the consultation, there was a massive turnout for the ballot, and the plan was unanimously adopted by the district council, but you cannot do it, because Big Brother”—the king of the nimby—“says that you have to have this, because you have not got enough housing.”

However, they just agreed that they would have more housing. The people who had agreed to have more housing were overruled, which is a total nonsense. The Government could do something about it today, but if they feel that they do not have the necessary power they could stick it in the Bill and then some of us would be happy, because that would be local democracy.

It is not true that the Government are not responsible for the delays in local development plans. On 1 March 2013, 95% of councils in England had to start their development plans again because of a change in the rules that was announced out of the blue, whereby everyone had to consult every adjoining authority. That is why there has been a delay in my area, which, proportionally, has more
neighbourhood development plans either agreed or under way than anywhere else in the country. We have adopted this philosophy. I have argued the case in communities throughout my constituency. However, the whole process has to start again because we have not consulted Sheffield, Mansfield and other places that are nowhere near the 500 square miles of Bassetlaw.

That is a nonsense, and the Government could do something about it instantly. Our plan would be speeded up overnight if that happened. The public would be consulted, and would agree where housing should go. The Government would get their numbers, and we would get our housing everywhere. Even Bremgrove would get the housing that it needs.

Let me give a couple of examples of the beauty of neighbourhood development plans. The Sturton ward provides one of the prime examples in the country of how a development plan should be written: an environmentally green development plan that specifies the kind of energy that we want in the community, the implication being that priority in new housing will go to developers who use green technologies. That is a community which is looking to the future and encouraging the right kind of housing. Such planning will enhance green technologies in this country, unlike the arbitrary wind farms and so forth which communities, strangely, do not like. Let communities have control through their development plans. The Government could announce that today—and that is my second request to the Minister.

When mayors are coming to city regions like the new Sheffield city region of which Bassetlaw will doubtless become a part, we should let those new mayors have the appeals. Let us localise the process more, so that there is more accountability, which will mean more housing rather than less. Let us take the process away from the Minister and the Minister’s officials. Surely that appeals to Tory Back Benchers and their sense of community.

Another big plan of which we in Bassetlaw are pioneers is the urban neighbourhood development plan. Virtually everywhere in the country has villages and parishes with parish precepts. They have a bit of money, and they have a democratic structure—rightly so—and that includes parts of my area. But how can such plans be created in an urban area where there is no such structure? It is impossible to define community by what has historically been there—waterways, forests and churches—is fundamental to the possibility of transforming urban planning through neighbourhood development planning.

The ability to define community by what has historically been there—waterways, forests and churches—is fundamental to the possibility of transforming urban planning through neighbourhood development planning. The key barrier will be money. That little impoverished community in my area around the great priory church, which was once the big countryside in the country—the end of the road through the forest, historically—has no funding itself, and has no structures for funding. We could have 30 or 40 urban neighbourhood development plans in my communities, but that would impose a huge burden on a small district council. The Government need to think about how to provide incentives, and get the models going. In Retford, for instance, the church is keen to be not just “church as building” but “church as the heart of the community”. Retford can lead the way in developing the built community around the church. Not just churches, but the many communities that have been built around those churches historically, need that kind of original thinking. That could be achieved, but the Government need to give a bit of flexibility. The powers that are local must be kept local. The Government must not overrule them.

Mark Pawsey: The hon. Gentleman is speaking with great eloquence about local powers. Would he care to tell us what happened to local powers between 1997 and 2010?

John Mann: The hon. Gentleman ought to know that neighbourhood planning had its origins in the 2003 legislation. That is how Bassetlaw got in first, and I have been around since then promoting it. The concept has been part of the planning arrangements since 2003.

I have endorsed the moves by the Government, except for the absurd one introduced on 1 March 2013 to stop all the development plans and frameworks that were in progress and delay them for three years. That was a chronic error on the part of past Ministers. I hope to hear from the Minister that the Secretary of State and the Government will not overrule neighbourhood development plans on appeal. They must send out the message that if a community takes responsibility for where its new housing and the rest of its developments should be, it will not be overruled by the Government. That could be done today; it would be a huge boost to communities across the country.

7.31 pm

Mrs Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Finding a way to build the new homes we need while ensuring that we safeguard our green spaces and protect the character and quality of life in our urban and suburban neighbourhoods is one of the biggest challenges we face in modern Britain. We clearly have to respond to the concerns of the many young people who are finding it difficult to buy or rent the homes they want in the places where they want to live. In my view, however, it is also crucial that we do all we can to protect our open spaces, which play such an important role in the towns and cities of this great country of ours. As an MP representing a constituency that includes substantial areas of green-belt land, I am very much aware of how important it is to maintain full green-belt protection. I welcome the fact that the Bill is entirely consistent with that aim. It is crucial to prevent the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas, to conserve wildlife habitats and to provide crucial opportunities for outdoor health and sporting activities.

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend also acknowledge that we need to conserve the ecology of such areas, especially through the use of hedgehog superhighways?
Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

**Mrs Villiers:** I warmly agree with my hon. Friend's sentiment and commend his hedgehog campaign.

A number of provisions in the Bill will be helpful in delivering the new homes that we need and to which the Government are committed. We have had some helpful insight into how clauses 1 to 6 will help to strengthen neighbourhood planning and make it more effective. Establishing a register of prior approval applications for permitted development rights under clause 8 will also be welcomed, not least because of the concern felt about such rights. More visibility and transparency will be helpful in that regard. Clauses 9 to 30 look as though they will make the eye-watering complexity of some aspects of the compulsory purchase system somewhat easier to navigate. I hope that that will assist some of the major regeneration schemes.

However, a concern has been raised with me by my constituent Dr Oliver Natelson about the provisions in clause 7 on pre-commencement planning conditions, about which my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) has spoken eloquently. Dr Natelson was worried when media coverage of the announcement of the Bill in the Queen's Speech indicated that obligations to carry out archaeological and wildlife surveys would be “swept away”. I welcome the Secretary of State's clarification on that today, and I invite the Minister to expand on it and to confirm that clause 7 will not restrict the power of local councils to impose the planning conditions necessary to make a development acceptable, including those relating to wildlife, habitats, flooding and heritage.

I would also urge the Minister to consider an important point that is not covered by the Bill. It relates to vacant public sector land. An example in my constituency is a site in Wood Street in High Barnet that is owned by the NHS but has not been used for many years and is becoming increasingly derelict. No matter how many times I raise this with the NHS, nothing seems to happen. In my view, it should take a decision either to use it for healthcare purposes or to sell it on so that it can be used for new homes or open space.

I should like to illustrate some of the general issues underlying the Bill and its objectives by considering the situation in my Chipping Barnet constituency. Over the last five years, around 5,300 new homes have been delivered in the borough of Barnet, including more than 2,000 affordable homes. This is the biggest programme of house building in outer London, and Barnet’s Conservative council plans to deliver another 20,000 homes over the next 10 years. In order to do that while conserving our precious green spaces and protecting the character of our suburban environment, the council has embarked on a number of large regeneration projects. These include four of the borough’s largest housing estates, one of which is Dollis Valley in my constituency. These regeneration projects are due to deliver 7,000 new homes—4,000 more than were previously on the estates—with a mix of social rent, affordable and market rate homes to buy. Although this work started over 10 years ago, it has much in common with the council estate regeneration strategy announced by the Government in February. By 2020, it is hoped that the council will have built 500 new council homes. So far, 40 have been built but the pace of delivery is increasing.

A key consideration in relation to planning and house building, whether in national debates in Parliament such as this one or in local discussions on development proposals, is whether the local infrastructure can cope with the new demands being placed on it. Locally in Barnet, work is under way to try to deliver this in relation to the housing schemes I have mentioned. For example, 10 new or replacement schools are planned across the borough at primary and secondary level, as well as new college and university buildings. I also warmly welcomed the recent opening of the Hope Corner community centre as part of the Dollis Valley regeneration scheme in my constituency, and I thank Barnet Council and Barnet Churches Action for enabling that to happen. I am sure that the community centre will be a great asset for the many new homes that are already being delivered as part of the regeneration.

However, issues surrounding infrastructure are sometimes difficult or impossible to resolve. In my constituency, that is particularly true when they relate to local roads and transport. This was one of the many reasons I opposed the redevelopment of Cat Hill on the boundary of my constituency. It is deeply regrettable that my constituents are already suffering the negative consequences of Enfield Council’s decision to grant planning permission for that project. I am also concerned about a proposal to redevelop the North London Business Park in the Brunswick Park area of my constituency. Many residents are strongly opposed to this plan, and understandably so. I try to support new homes where I can, but that application is just not acceptable. Some 1,200 new homes are proposed, including five blocks at least seven storeys high, with other blocks of up to 10 storeys high. As my constituent Gilbert Knight put it in his representations to the planning authority, this would be “massive in scale and out of keeping with the surrounding low-rise residential areas”.

Another grave concern is the proposal to create an entrance to the site from Ashbourne Avenue. A similar proposal was rejected back in the 1960s because the roads could not cope with it, and I sincerely hope that it will be rejected again for that reason. That is one of the many reasons I am resolutely opposed to this development, alongside ward councillor Lisa Rutter.

I should like to move on to some happier examples in which the planning system looks as though it will deliver new homes in a way that is much more acceptable to local residents and much more in tune with the local environment. New Barnet provides an example of how active community associations can shape the character of their local neighbourhoods, defeat plans they do not like and still deliver significant numbers of new homes. In a four-year battle, the Save New Barnet campaign group defeated attempts by both Asda and Tesco for new supermarkets in the area. Rather than just opposing the plans, residents put forward a credible and workable alternative for new homes. Eventually, both supermarket giants gave up the struggle and decided that it was best to work with rather than against the local community.

New homes have been built on the Tesco site, and around 364 are now likely to go ahead on the Asda land. There are still issues to be resolved, not least in ensuring that section 106 money goes to benefit the immediate surrounding area rather than being spent further afield.

None the less, this is an illustration of how a system that has a very active role for local communities is not
incompatible with delivering new homes, which is why I thought it was appropriate to refer to it in a debate on this Bill.

In conclusion, although the Bill provides some useful improvements to a number of aspects of the planning system, there are still some important issues with which to grapple. I will leave the Minister with a few questions about the Bill and the Government’s approach to delivering more homes. First, I would like his views on the calls by local authorities to be able to recover more clearly the costs of the planning process through the fees that they levy on applications made. Secondly, what further steps can be taken to ensure that landowners build the homes for which they have been given planning permission, rather than land banking them? Thirdly, what further action can be taken to help London residents to buy property in the capital and compete with investment buyers from around the world who are pushing up prices?

Finally, I wish to draw the House’s attention to some picturesque fields in the northern part of my constituency in High Barnet. This is known locally as Whalebones because of the whalebone gateway that frames the entrance to the land. With its field of geese, it is a local landmark that is held in great affection. Sadly, it is now under threat from development.

In my speech this evening, I have sought to emphasise some of the big efforts that are being made to deliver thousands of new homes in my local borough through regeneration and brownfield development. We need new homes, and this Bill will help to deliver more of them. We can build them without sacrificing vital green spaces such as Whalebones. That is why I will be campaigning with determination to protect this much-loved enclave of green space, which matters so much to my constituents in Chipping Barnet.

7.41 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I am pleased to have the opportunity to contribute to this debate on the Neighbourhood Planning Bill, and it is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Mrs Villiers).

I am a supporter of neighbourhood planning. Before entering this place, I spent my working life as a town planner seeking to involve and engage communities in planning policymaking. I know the benefits that come from giving communities the ability to shape planning policy and from giving that policy formal weight in the planning process. I therefore welcome the measures in this Bill, which will strengthen neighbourhood plans and neighbourhood planning. I also have concerns about several aspects of this Bill, which reflect my wider concerns about the Government’s approach to planning.

We have in the UK a strong plan-led system, which allows democratically elected local authorities to lay out the basis on which applications for new development will be considered. There is no excuse for not having a plan in place or for poor performance. Last year, the Government made that system less coherent with the introduction of permission in principle, which introduces a blunt form of zoning into our finely balanced plan-led system that is capable of balancing so many different interests and concerns to get to a good decision.

I am concerned that this Bill does nothing to address the serious under-resourcing of planning departments while also giving local authorities new responsibilities to resource neighbourhood planning. Resources for local planning departments have been cut by 46% in the past five years, and the British Property Federation—not councils themselves but the private sector—identifies that this under-resource is the primary cause of problems in the planning system. During debates on the Housing and Planning Bill, I argued that councils should be able to recover the full cost of development management services through fees. I was very disappointed that the Government rejected that proposal at the time, and I hope that the new Minister will reconsider it. It is a common-sense proposal that will make a huge difference to efficient planning decision making.

Councils must also be properly resourced to support neighbourhood planning. Involving and engaging communities is resource intensive, particularly in areas where there are high levels of deprivation, but unless it is done properly we will not have neighbourhood plans that fully represent the views of the local community. Sadly, it remains the case that those in our communities who often stand to gain the most from the things that planning can deliver—for example those in housing need—are often those whose voices are not heard in debates about planning policy, and that must change.

I am concerned that this Bill proposes to water down pre-commencement conditions. Planning conditions are one of the significant levers that local planning authorities have to secure the best possible outcomes for communities. Very often, the things that form the basis for conditions are make or break issues for communities—anything from providing additional sewer capacity to the choice of bricks. Conditions should not be unreasonable, but it should remain the prerogative of the local authority to decide what conditions best protect the interests of local residents. The idea that conditions can be imposed only following the written agreement of the developer greatly underestimates the role that conditions play in ensuring good outcomes. This proposal also sets up an unnecessarily adversarial relationship between applicant and local authority where, in reality, it is best practice for the parties to come together to discuss and agree conditions through the pre-application process. I hope that the Government will reconsider this proposal.

I am concerned that the measures in this Bill relating to permitted development rights do not even begin to address the problems that are being caused by the extension of those rights to allow the conversion of offices to residential without planning consent. In London, the policy is having a detrimental effect on the supply of business space in some areas. We are also seeing new homes being delivered without regard for the physical infrastructure or public services to support an increasing population because they are not subject to section 106 agreements. We are seeing new homes being delivered without regard to minimum space standards or the types of homes that are most needed. Most importantly, we are seeing new homes being delivered with no affordable housing being provided in areas where it is desperately needed.

Instead of tinkering with the policy around permitted development rights, the Government should be radically rethinking it so that all new homes are subject to the full requirements of the planning process and developers
are not able to profit from new homes without contributing to the green space, play space, school places and medical facilities that their residents will need in the future.

Fundamentally, this is a tinkering piece of legislation when we need major reform. It is polishing the bannister when the staircase is falling down. The housing crisis is one of the most significant issues facing our country. The planning system is critical to delivering both the new homes that we need and the successful communities that we want to see. This is no less than a debate about the future of our communities for our children and our grandchildren, the kind of places that we want them to be able to live in and the quality of life that we want them to have. Properly resourced planning is a tool for delivery not a barrier—a tool for ensuring fair outcomes and high quality. Instead of this paltry Bill, the Government should be setting out a vision for planning and for involving communities in planning; bringing forward a national infrastructure commission on a statutory footing, because infrastructure is critical to the delivery of new homes; building up our plan-led system as the basis for certainty in decision making; establishing a basis in legislation for new towns and garden cities; setting a context for communities and councils to come together to plan for the future; and resourcing councils to build the genuinely affordable council homes that we so desperately need. As this Bill passes through Parliament, I hope that the Government will take the opportunity to reconsider it and to make it fit for the challenges that we face.

7.48 pm

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes). I agreed with some of the things that she said, and certainly with the emphasis that she placed on infrastructure and the need to get it right. We have a strange system in which we bring forward development as if it is a bad thing, and put in facilities—she mentioned green spaces, but there are many other things that communities want, such as health facilities and primary schools—afterwards to mitigate the “bad effects” of development. However, recognising that the words “cities” and “civic” are cognate with “civilisation”, we should be bringing forward holistic schemes that create good places in the first instance.

I disagreed with the hon. Lady. Lady on the subject of the local voice. I support the Bill because we need more local voice. The fundamental problem we face is that when people oppose development, they do so not because they want to see their family in trouble or not having somewhere to live. I have yet to meet the woman who wants her daughter or granddaughter to live in a ditch, and I do not think I am going to meet that person. They oppose development because they feel that local people have no say—no voice—in what gets built, where it is built, what it looks like or who has the possible exception of the all-party beer group. It recognises, as does the hon. Gentleman, that the really important thing about getting the voice right is that it should be the voice of the people who are going to live in the dwellings.

The hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood said that the local planning system should embrace every single house, and talked about the colour of bricks as if it were a good thing that local councillors were deciding the colour of bricks. I had a conversation recently with a local house builder who had a plan for a very modern house. Naturally, he wanted a render that was appropriate for that. It was bright white. He had a conversation with his local planning officer—I am not making this up—who said, “No, no. It’s too white. It’s too stark. You shouldn’t do that,” so he asked the planning officer to look at the relevant page on the website and choose the colour. She was a little nonplussed by this, but the house builder said, “You don’t want the one that I want, so why don’t you choose one and save a lot of time?” Eventually she chose a colour, which he said he would change in due course if he did not like it. It ought not to be necessary to have such a conversation. I have met house builders who have had seven or eight choices of gutter colour refused.

Helen Hayes: In each of our constituencies, we can think of examples of developments that, because of poor finishing and poor-quality choices of building materials, blight their communities for decades. It is not a trivial point that I am making. Once something is built, it affects that community for many, many years to come. These things are important.

Mr Bacon: I agree that they are important. The best people to choose the quality of the materials, and to make sure that they are of the highest possible standard, are the people who will live in those dwellings, not somebody else working to a profit margin, which is why more self-build and custom house building will result in higher quality.

I said earlier that I agreed with the hon. Lady on the subject of the local voice. I support the Bill because we need more local voice. The fundamental problem we face is that when people oppose development, they do so not because they want to see their family in trouble or not having somewhere to live. I have yet to meet the woman who wants her daughter or granddaughter to live in a ditch, and I do not think I am going to meet that person. They oppose development because they feel that local people have no say—no voice—in what gets built, where it is built, what it looks like or who has the first chance to live there. If we change that, we change the conversation completely.

Another reason why self-build and custom house building driven by customers is so important is that instead of opposition, it is met with local acceptance. I know that the chairs of many parish councils want to see dwellings in their local areas designed by local people for local people, to help local people. Of course, that also has the benefit of helping local house builders—local small and medium-sized enterprises, rather than large combines such as Persimmon, which are interested only in the bonus pool, which will result in 150 top managers getting a £600 million bonus pot, if they do reasonably well; it will be larger than that if they do very well. That business, like the banks, has been propped
up by huge amounts—many billions of pounds—of taxpayers’ money through Help to Buy and various other schemes. I would rather see that money going into higher-quality materials, better thermal performance and bigger spaces.

The fundamental question, which we have not been very good at answering so far, is why we have a shortage. People give different answers. We have heard about the lack of planning resource, although we have thousands of unbuilt extant planning permissions, so the reason can hardly be planning by itself. We often hear that there is a lack of land. Only 1.2% of the land area of this country is taken up with houses. The Ministry of Defence alone has 2% of the land area of the UK. There are more golf courses in Surrey than there are houses. The problem is not planning per se; it is a lack of accessible land, a lack of financeable propositions, rather than a lack of finance, and a planning model that is broken.

If we want to correct that, we need to put customers at the heart of that model—people who will live in those dwellings. The way to do that is to separate the business of placemaking—all the things that I am sure the hon. Lady would agree with: creating places that are well served, well designed, well run, well governed and well connected—from the business of building houses on infrastructure that is already in place, with well serviced plots that have all the things that we would expect, including fibre to the premises, water, gas and so on, provided by one of the many hundreds of suppliers. There is a growing market of people out there who are willing to supply the house that people want, rather than what a very small number of large companies are telling people that they want. We need to put the customer at the centre, as in all other successful markets. That is the way that we will solve the housing crisis.

7.55 pm

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr Bacon), who is an authority on housing and planning. It did not take him long to get on to self-build homes.

It is a great pleasure to participate in a debate on planning—an area in which we get only one opportunity in many generations to get it right. Once land is developed, it stays developed for many years—perhaps several hundred years, if it is housing. We need to give more thought to getting that right. Development provides economic activity, the homes that are so badly needed, better conditions and a better environment.

Since the Localism Act 2011, the role of neighbourhood planning has been well entrenched as an integral part of our planning system. I am proud that in my constituency the 100th referendum has taken place in Coton Park. That arose as my constituency is the fastest-growing town in the west midlands. I am pleased that the neighbourhood plan was developed in an urban area. It was interesting that the hon. Member for Basseterre (John Mann) seemed to indicate that it was easy for villages to draw up a neighbourhood plan, but more challenging for urban areas. That certainly is the case. One of the first issues for Coton Park was identifying the area that the plan would relate to. I was very proud to add my foreword to its neighbourhood plan, and I would like to learn from its experience.

It is important to understand how the neighbourhood plan came about. This was a new community with housing that was built 10 or 15 years ago. There was no established community in the area. The community came together, interestingly, to oppose a planning application for industrial use close by. It argued its case and succeeded, causing the developer to change his plans for the site. I advised members of the community that, having come together to effect that change in planning, there was a strong reason for them to remain together and produce a neighbourhood plan that would influence future development in the area. They started in 2011 with their application for front-runner status. It took them until October 2014 to submit their neighbourhood plan, which went to a referendum in October 2015 and was finally approved in December last year.

Among the many observations I have about the plan, the first is that it took too long. The process took four years, and I am concerned that the time taken on the only such plan that has been prepared in my constituency will be a disincentive to other communities. It was my hope that, the community having been a front runner and having got its neighbourhood plan in place, I would see other communities in my constituency come forward. However, only four others have done so, which is disappointing. I hope that when he responds, the Minister will talk about ways of speeding up and simplifying the process. I am pleased to see the provisions in the Bill that require local authorities to set out the nature of the support that they are able to provide to communities. That will give those communities the confidence to embark on the project.

In Coton, the community was incredibly lucky to have a number of forum members who were not in full-time employment and were able to put in the work involved in developing the neighbourhood plan. That is pretty extensive. It involves surveying the entire area, talking to residents and getting those surveys back before starting the work of drawing up the document. Perhaps the Minister will speak about the level of detail required in some neighbourhood plans. In some instances, it goes too far, which exaggerates the amount of work and time required to develop the plan.

It is certainly harder for urban areas to bring forward a neighbourhood plan, but in constituencies such as mine, where the majority of development is focused in the urban areas, rural communities often wonder why they should bother with a neighbourhood plan when it is so much easier, cheaper and quicker to develop a parish plan. Parish plans do not carry the same weight within the planning system, of course, but if development is unlikely, there is a question mark over whether a community would want to go through the substantial amount of work involved in drawing up a neighbourhood plan.

However, there are some absolutely wonderful benefits of a community undertaking a neighbourhood plan, and one of them is that it gets new people involved in the democratic process. It strengthens local democracy and brings forward people we might not otherwise see. A great example is a lady called Jill Simpson-Vince, who chaired the Coton Park neighbourhood plan team. She had never considered getting involved in local democracy, but she was persuaded, through her involvement in the community, to become a councillor. She now chairs our local planning committee. Neighbourhood plans are therefore a great way of bringing people forward.
Of course, when people get engaged in that way, they become much more receptive to development, because they can have a hand in influencing exactly what takes place. The Secretary of State spoke about that earlier. Communities that develop their own neighbourhood plan tend to take, on average, 10% to 11% more housing than they otherwise would, because they find themselves in the driving seat. To pick up on the remarks from the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), where people can shape development, they will ensure better development. Sometimes it is hard to get a community to understand what good development is. They often know what bad development is, because they have seen it, but too often they do not recognise good development when they see it. However, if they are involved in a neighbourhood plan, they will go to places to see what good development is, and they will then be able to recognise what is good in their own neighbourhood plan.

I have one negative point to make. One experience from the Coton Park neighbourhood plan is that the community at times felt a little hamstrung by the control that the local planning authority held. For example, the grant that was provided to the community to develop the neighbourhood plan was initially devolved to the local authority, which led to a feeling within the neighbourhood plan team that the local authority had a say in what they were bringing forward. If the Minister can find some way to subvert that, so that the money goes directly to those communities, we will end up with better neighbourhood plans.

I want to thank the Royal Town Planning Institute and its team of Planning Aid officials. For example, a gentleman called Bob Keith provided expertise to Coton Park. I gather that that advice and expertise is being provided from other sources. It is incredibly important that a community that is coming together to draw up a plan has someone who can offer help and assistance but is not part of the local authority.

The success of Coton’s neighbourhood plan is that the team identified serious issues within their community, particularly with access roads and existing roundabouts. The area covered by the neighbourhood plan has been extended and will include Coton Park East, and the developer of the area has adopted within its planning the principles laid down in the Coton Park neighbourhood plan. I am delighted that the community has just been informed that the section 106 moneys that are coming from other sources. It is incredibly important that a community that is coming together to draw up a plan has someone who can offer help and assistance but is not part of the local authority.

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I am delighted that more weight will be given to neighbourhood plans as this process is developed. It means that even if the process does take time, there will be much greater regard for it, and the results will be evidence-based.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you are indicating that I should bring my remarks to a close. There is much in this Bill that is of great advantage. The neighbourhood plans system is working effectively. We just need more encouragement for more communities to take advantage of the opportunities that the Bill will provide them with.

8.5 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey). Since becoming a Member of Parliament, I have found that, rather like the Secretary of State, concerns about planning are by far the most common issue that constituents raise with me, whether it is increasing pressure on local services and transport infrastructure or frustrations with the local council for failing to listen to and act on their concerns. A recent email I received perfectly captured local feelings in just four words: “Enough housing, infrastructure required”.

Planning failures—everything from the daily commute, to people’s children having access to a good local school, to the place where they live having a sense of community—have the greatest impact on peoples’ lives. When building new houses, the focus has too often been on providing new dwellings for newcomers, with an apparent disregard for existing residents. Road networks designed for a village have to cope with the traffic of a town, plus the additional out-of-town traffic thundering through narrow streets. As the demand for housing increases, we must recognise and respond to the challenges that additional housing brings for existing residents, rather than focusing all our attention on creating new residents.

A glaring example of the failure of planning is the A5225 in my constituency, which ought to be serving the local population. Wigan Borough Council has built most of the route that goes through its borough, but Bolton Council has not followed suit. In fact, in Atherton there is a roundabout junction with massive concrete blocks showing where the A5225 should have been continued, and daily we see the problems that its absence creates. There is now a proposal for 1,700 houses to be built over the proposed route of the A5225, thus preventing its completion. That is a double failure that guarantees that road upgrades will be impossible while delivering massive and unsustainable housing development.

Hundreds of constituents replied to my online survey about congestion in Bolton West, and the vast majority of people from Westhoughton thought that a revived plan for the A5225 would be the right solution to our congestion problems. I am currently running a petition, to be presented to Bolton Council, against the proposed 1,700 houses at the Chequerbent roundabout, and it has been signed by over 1,000 local people. This development, and those proposed for Hulton and south of Atherton, will add many thousands of people and cars to the local area. Local opinion is that the council, rather than responding to those concerns, seeks to build a roundabout if it is not part of a transport plan for the A5225.

My constituency is now part of the commuter belt for Manchester, a work destination for other commuters and a place where people further out in Lancashire use the local railway stations for park and ride. That all adds pressures on the local road and rail network that do not seem to have been addressed when each individual housing project is designed and built. The pace of development for transport is lacking considerably in Bolton West. For example, I receive many complaints about the rail service and how capacity can be increased on the line, which takes people from Blackrod, Horwich and Lostock en route to Bolton and Manchester. Although I welcome the electrification that will add 281 new carriages to the local route, with an increased service of...
Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): It is a pleasure to contribute to the debate and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green). Let me say at the outset that I have no quibbles at all with the provisions of the Bill, which are sensible enhancements to the neighbourhood planning process. I very much support the overall principles of neighbourhood planning: it is absolutely right that local communities have the ability to shape the future size and content of development. I also accept absolutely that neighbourhood plans cannot be out of kilter with the overall strategic housing needs of a town or a wider local authority area. My right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) correctly made the point that neighbourhood plans have not been a nimby’s charter, and communities engage enthusiastically with them.

However, I do have some concerns, which I would like to put on the record. I am concerned that the potential for neighbourhood planning is impaired by some of the unintended consequences of wider planning issues, and several Members, particularly the hon. Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann), alluded to that. Let me illustrate the point further with an example from my constituency.

On the southern edge of Milton Keynes is a charming little village called Bow Brickhill. It has a few hundred residents. It is a place of great civic pride and engagement. If there is a charity event to raise funds for a local facility, the residents are the ones who put together all the events to raise the money. They have engaged enthusiastically with neighbourhood planning, and many of them have devoted considerable time and energy and their own resources to developing the plans. They are far from being nimby; in their plans, they wish to see some sensible development. They want, naturally, to preserve the semi-rural character of the village, both for its own sake and because it is one of the leisure facilities of the Milton Keynes area, with plenty of open spaces. However, the residents are now becoming confused, exasperated and, indeed, angry that the hard work they have put in may come to nothing. The problem is nothing to do with their neighbourhood plan; it is to do with Milton Keynes’s ability to meet the rigid five-year supply target. Let me just put that in context.

Milton Keynes has made an enormous contribution to the number of new houses in this country. We celebrate our 50th birthday in January, and our population is already well in excess of the quarter of a million the original planners envisaged. We have developed plans, which are now being considered by the local authority, to further expand the population—potentially by as much as 400,000—over the next few decades. The National Infrastructure Commission has been tasked by the Government to look at developing the Oxford-Milton Keynes-Cambridge corridor as an economic and housing growth and a transport development project, with projects such as east-west rail and the Oxford to Cambridge expressway. I am in the top 10 electorates in the country, and at every election I contest there—I have done four now—there are more and more doors through which to deliver leaflets.

In addition, in 2013, Milton Keynes Council passed its core strategy, which will deliver 28,000 houses over the next 10 years, but they are not being developed quickly enough. I do not have time to go into all the reasons why that is the case, but we are not meeting that target. Consequently, unplanned, speculative applications for housing outside the development areas are being granted, and some of those are immediately adjacent to the village of Bow Brickhill. If they are granted, they will, effectively, render redundant its neighbourhood plan. That is why the neighbourhood is considerably concerned.

Compounding this situation is the fact that the neighbouring authority—Aylesbury Vale—had a local plan that did not get through the inspectorate. It is now working on a new plan, but in the absence of that, applications for even larger speculative developments are being put in right on the border between Aylesbury Vale and Milton Keynes. These are massive developments and would change utterly the semi-rural area around Milton Keynes.

Therefore, we have a situation in which, in a part of the country where we have expanded and want to develop; where we have enthusiastic communities that want to take part in shaping their neighbourhoods;
and where we are in line with wider Government objectives on transport planning and we are developing the Oxford to Cambridge corridor; all that planned, sustainable development is under threat because we are not meeting the rigid targets I mentioned.

I therefore simply ask the Minister to give us some space and flexibility to develop our plans, either by giving flexibility on the five-year target or by bringing in measures to speed up the delivery of already agreed housing. That would be widely applauded in the local area, and it would reignite the enthusiasm for neighbourhood planning.

8.17 pm

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): I am grateful to catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart). I will be brief, as the hour is late. I have one or two things, as a chartered surveyor and declaring my Member’s interests as a landowner, that I would like to say about the Bill, which I warmly welcome.

Neighbourhood planning is very important. The problem is that, in my constituency, it is not working. It is not working because I represent two local authorities, one of which has a local plan and the other of which—Cotswold—does not have a local plan, for reasons best known to itself. The result, I say to my hon. Friend the Minister, is that, in The Cotswolds, which is 80% in the area of natural beauty, we have one of the most complicated planning systems anywhere in the country. I represent over 100 towns and villages, and we do not have a single neighbourhood plan adopted, because we do not have a local plan in place. That cannot be acceptable, and I warmly welcome the Secretary of State’s statement today that he will take powers in the Bill to force local authorities, that have been laggards, like mine, to get a local plan in place.

Mr Bacon: Does my hon. Friend agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin), who said that it would be a good idea, where the planning authority does not have a local plan, for the neighbourhood plan to become, sui generis, the local plan for that parish?

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: My hon. Friend has taken the words out of my mouth—I would do exactly that. We need to simplify neighbourhood plans, as we have done in this Bill. We need to give them greater weight, as we have done in the Bill.

However, there are problems even where there is a local plan in place. Stroud District Council has a local plan in place. I have a village in the very south of my constituency, which is huge—65 miles long—that has an advanced-stage, very professional neighbourhood plan, and there is also a local plan in place. However, a developer took the district council to appeal over an area right next to the cricket pitch and the village hall. The village was desperate not to develop it, but the decision was overturned on appeal. I would just say to my hon. Friend the Minister that, where there is a local plan and a neighbourhood plan in place, it should be de rigueur that the Planning Inspectorate does not overturn those plans on appeal, except in wholly exceptional circumstances.

I warmly welcome the powers to look at pre-commencement orders. As a chartered surveyor, I have advised, on an unpaid basis, on a very big development in East Anglia. Although it was designated in the local plan from the beginning, the process took five years because of the over-zealousness of the local authority. Think of all the houses that could have been built by now if the over-zealous pre-commencement conditions were not in place.

Finally, I want quickly to move on to compulsory purchase because nobody has said much about that in this debate. I spent many months sitting on the High Speed Rail (London - West Midlands) Bill Select Committee, and I have seen how HS2, as a major public acquiring authority, works. Some of the compulsory acquisitions, of which there were a very large number, were in my view over-zealous. We need to be careful about large acquiring authorities being over-zealous.

I am grateful for the provisions in the Bill on temporary acquisitions, but, equally, the requirement for such acquisitions should be tempered by what the acquiring authority needs to do on them. If it needs to demolish somebody’s house, proper compensation should be paid.

I am concerned about the provision to do away with the 10-year disturbance payment. Where there is an uplift in the value of the land, even subsequently, the person whose land has been acquired gets some benefit from that uplift. I heard what my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said about the no scheme world. In theory, that is an ideal way of valuing a property—as a chartered surveyor, I know about these things—because it ignores the uplift, or indeed the fall, caused by the scheme itself. The danger is that the acquiring authority will acquire properties too cheaply, because there will be no allowance for any hope value for potential planning permission. Given that a lot of the big schemes are near centres of population, where the land will—if not immediately, at least in due course a few years down the line—get planning permission, it seems to me that the acquiring authority is getting an unnecessary advantage.

However, I warmly welcome the provisions for compulsory purchase whereby interest can be paid and payments in advance can be made. As we saw on the HS2 Bill, all these things are desperately necessary. With those few words, I warmly welcome this Bill.

8.22 pm

Stuart Andrew (Pudsey) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this debate because planning has certainly affected my constituency for a good number of years. I was going to touch on the five-year land supply issue, but that has been ably covered by a number of colleagues.

My constituency is part of Leeds. It has enjoyed a great deal of prosperity and growth, but if I look at just one of the wards in my constituency, it has seen more than 1,000 homes built in it during the past few years, with very little infrastructure to support it. There is therefore a growing sense of frustration when people cannot get to work because the roads are congested, when their children cannot get into the school or when they struggle to get a doctor’s appointment. As a consequence, when neighbourhood planning was first introduced, it was seen as an opportunity for communities such as mine.
I must say, however, that in our instance there was concern right from the very outset. In its core strategy, the city council decided to build 70,000 homes during the plan period. That is an ambitious target—it will mean a considerable number of houses have to be built each year—but the problem is that that target, we believe, was based on outdated information. It was based on the 2008 population projections, which said that the number of people across the city would go up to 765,000 by 2011. The census showed us that that was wrong, with a 14,000 difference.

I am raising this matter because the city council obviously has to find sites on which to build these houses. In my constituency, all the mills and factories have gone, and we have done the right thing by building houses to regenerate those sites. However, all we have left now is the green belt. The neighbourhood plans in my areas have to conform to the strategic approach of the city council, which says that we have to build 70,000 houses. My areas have to adhere to that in the neighbourhood plans, and are therefore being forced to look at green-belt sites. They do not want to do that—of course they do not want to—and they are actively trying to stop that happening. I see a real problem because if my areas put forward such green-belt sites in a referendum, there is absolutely no way that that would get through, and we would not therefore have a neighbourhood plan.

I have asked questions time and again. I welcome my hon. Friend to his post. He will be hearing a lot from me, I am sure, over the coming months.

Gavin Barwell: I already have.

Stuart Andrew: Indeed. I extend to my hon. Friend a warm invitation to visit my constituency so that he can see the issues that we face at first hand.

Time and again, in questions and letters, I have asked about the exceptional circumstance in which the green belt can be developed and, time and again, we have been told that housing targets cannot be considered as an exceptional circumstance. However, in the neighbouring authority of Bradford—it abuts my constituency—the inspector recently said that such houses can be built because the figure is aspirational and the employment criteria allow it to happen. There is now even more concern in my constituency that when this goes to the inspector, he will say, because the figure of 70,000 has been agreed, that we can build on the green belt. That would have a terrible effect on my constituency. The green belt is there to stop urban sprawl. We do not want it to be just a part of the big city of Leeds. The identifiable towns of Guiseley, Yeadon, Rawdon, Horsforth, Calverley, Farsley and Pudsey all have their own identity.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): And Rodley.

Stuart Andrew: Yes, Rodley. If I miss one out, I will be in real trouble.

I am trying to make the point that there is a willingness to make neighbourhood plans work, but when there is such a conflict with the city council, it is very difficult to introduce them. There is real concern about the green belt, and I hope that the Minister will come to my constituency soon so that I can show him, in detail, the problems we are facing.

8.26 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate, and to welcome the Minister to his place. I will be comparatively brief because I endorse everything said by my right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) about neighbourhood plans. One of the great enjoyments of my earlier career was to work with him in developing the policy at an early stage. He is right that we did not pick up on some bits of it at the time, but the Minister and his colleagues now have a chance to finish the job.

I have two thoughts about neighbourhood plans. It is important that we push forward with them. I have been disappointed by the slow take-up in areas of outer London, for example, compared with many other parts of the country. That is why it is right to take the measures we are taking. If I may be blunt, I also have a concern that, in some cases, some of our colleagues on local government planning authorities do not always encourage the development of neighbourhood plans because, frankly, they do not want to give up the power that comes from sitting on the borough or district planning committee. That goes wholly against the spirit of what we, as a party, are trying to do. I therefore welcome such steps.

I have another practical suggestion. Currently, the Government leave a gap of eight weeks between the referendum and the making of the plan. I understand why that is done. According to the statute, it is essentially to enable the consideration of any conflict with European and human rights law. Will the Minister consider whether that gap is necessary? Eminent lawyers have suggested that it is almost inconceivable that a plan would advance to the referendum stage without those issues being considered. If we revisited that, we could probably shave another two months off the bringing of a plan into force. Perhaps we may discuss that as the Bill progresses.

The proposal on planning conditions is right. I have seen the abuse of planning conditions. To give just one example, a religious body based in my constituency wanted planning permission for a place of worship in a neighbouring authority. I am glad to say. It was hit with 24 conditions, 14 of them pre-commencement. A number of them in effect duplicated building regulation requirements, including one that undermined the exemption that the faith group has under part L of the building regulations on fuel conservation. That cannot be right and is an abuse.

There is a concern that if one appeals against a planning condition, potentially the whole permission is up for consideration by the inspector. Would it not be sensible to amend the regulations such that it is purely the condition that is appealed against that is subject to the appeal and any consideration of papers or, although unlikely, an inquiry? That would save uncertainty for the whole scheme and encourage people to move swiftly.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: It would speed it up.

Robert Neill: It would certainly speed things along markedly.
The planning register is a sensible and useful device. May I float another suggestion with the Minister? The Welsh Assembly Government have put the historic environmental record on a statutory footing. It might be useful to do that here so that local heritage information is available. That would avoid the risk of something being thrown up that delays the process after a good deal of investment has taken place.

Finally, I endorse all the comments made by my good friend, my hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), about compulsory purchase. He referred to the rates of interest. It is important that we deal swiftly with those matters. As I said to the Secretary of State, perhaps he would be prepared to meet some of us to yet again revisit the vexed issue of the inability of local planning authorities to impose planning conditions on their own land—land that they own as a landowner—that they would enforce as a local authority. Their inability to do that is bizarre. My London Borough of Bromley has ambitious schemes to drive business and business rates growth, but it is bizarre that it cannot, as an authority, put an obligation on its own land that it wishes to comply with in order to drive the rest of a scheme.

I hope that those are constructive suggestions that will make a good Bill even more useful.

8.31 pm

Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): I am delighted that the Government are giving local people the opportunity to shape the future of their communities. Our constituents have long asked for a greater say on planning, so I welcome the fact that the Bill gives them more power and delivers on our manifesto promises.

There can be no doubt that there is a need for housing, but it is vital that it is delivered in a way that is not only sustainable, but that complements and enhances our local areas. I am therefore very supportive of the key aims of the Bill. Results are already emerging to show that the Government are right to trust our communities to develop their own neighbourhood plans. As has been pointed out, early figures indicate that the level of house building in areas that have a plan is more than 10% higher than in the council’s local plan.

I will raise three matters with the Minister that are of concern to my constituents. He may be able to reassure them that they need not worry. First, I am conscious that although an acceleration in house building is required, developing a neighbourhood plan is a long drawn-out process. That means that those who are now starting on the journey and have a plan that is sufficiently developed to provide meaningful input to the local plan do not have the protections of those who have gone through the referendum phase. Clause 1 goes some way towards addressing that, but will the Minister clarify what guidance the referendum phase. Clause 1 goes some way towards addressing that, but will the Minister clarify what guidance the referendum phase. Clause 1 goes some way towards addressing that, but will the Minister clarify what guidance the referendum phase. Clause 1 goes some way towards addressing that, but will the Minister clarify what guidance will be given to local authorities so that there is consistency in the decision-making process not only from community to community, but across all decision makers? I welcome clause 3, which sets out the support a local authority will offer those who wish to create a neighbourhood plan by way of a statement of community involvement, which should be an enabler of quicker implementation.

Secondly, sustainability should be a key consideration for any development. It is understandable that local residents show concern when consultations are put forward for sizeable developments in their area. A good example is Dordon and Polesworth in my constituency, where 3,000 new houses have been proposed. That would have a huge impact on the infrastructure and services that residents enjoy, not least on the area’s road network. It is important that plans are made and that residents always have an input on potential new schools, roads, doctors’ surgeries and other local services. With that in mind, I ask the Minister to ensure that the provision of infrastructure and amenities is always a key consideration for local authorities when granting planning consent, and that when there is any significant house building the sustainability of the area is at the forefront of the design plans.

Finally, I wish to raise an issue of particular interest to me and to many of my constituents and those of other Members: the protection of our green belt. I am fully aware that the NPPF puts great emphasis on that, and there has been minimal development on it under the Conservative Government. However, areas such as Keresley and Fillongley in my constituency live in constant fear that a perceived demand for housing, particularly under the duty to co-operate with larger neighbouring councils, puts their green belt at risk of being developed on.

One of the key messages that I receive regularly from parish councils is that the calculation of housing needs seems to be over-inflated and does not reflect actual requirements, especially when local borough councils have met their supply targets. There is a real threat that predominantly rural areas such as North Warwickshire, which, as I have said, are annexed by much larger authorities, will be forced to develop on their green belt to meet the needs of other areas. That cannot be fair.

I must question the method of calculation. I was recently given the example of Coventry, which is seeking to take a number of properties in my constituency as it is unable to meet its own housing demand. It was calculated by the Office for National Statistics that there would be a population increase of about 79,000 in Coventry by 2031, which Coventry was unable to satisfy. Closer inspection of that number is quite revealing, however, showing that the predicted numbers of internal migration and immigration movements essentially cancel each other out, leaving the 79,000 people to come almost wholly from international immigration. As a result of the referendum in June, the Government are committed to a system of controlled immigration, so it is reasonable to assume that that number may no longer be a true reflection of need once the Brexit negotiation is concluded.

I would therefore like the Minister to consider including a further measure in the Bill: a pause on green-belt development unless there is a specific request from local residents. That would enable a review of the demand that our councils will face, which is surely difficult to estimate until the exact nature of what breakfast will look like—[Interruption.] I mean Brexit—somebody else got into trouble for that the other day. It is catching. It is difficult to estimate until the exact nature of what Brexit will look like is concluded. Once the green belt is developed on, it is lost for ever. We should always ensure that we have strong safeguards to protect it wherever possible.

Good development requires the developer, local people and the council to work together, and the Bill encourages dialogue to ensure that development better meets the needs of all interested parties. There should always be a balanced approach between providing the right number
of houses and affording our local communities the opportunity to improve their infrastructure while retaining their identity. The Bill strikes that balance by giving local people real control over their future, and I will support it tonight. However, I ask that due consideration be given to the important concerns that I have raised.

8.37 pm

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): It is a great pleasure to support the Second Reading of the Bill, and it is always a great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey). I do not intend to speak for more than five minutes, because I have noticed for the last hour that when Members do that, the cough of the Whip, my hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart), gets worse and worse. In the interests of preserving his voice, I will keep my contribution short.

I wish to focus on a couple of key points. First, we in Fylde are not against development. Indeed, about 6,000 houses have been developed there, mostly on greenfield land. However, Fylde is a small local authority, so 6,000 houses represent a lot of new build. We are currently working through an emerging local plan, and during the first stage, as part of an agreement, certain sites were taken off the plan and others were added. However, developers who realised that lucrative sites had come off the plan slapped planning applications on them, regardless of the will of the neighbourhood or the council. That was particularly true in villages such as Warton and Wea Green, much to the frustration of local people. The result is an even greater number of houses than the plan started with.

I find it frustrating as a Member of Parliament that after people and the council have been asked to go along with the process of neighbourhood plans and local plans, and after they have identified suitable sites near the M55 that could be developed without controversy, developers seem to have given them the two-finger salute by putting in big applications on sites that were taken out of the plan. Everyone seems to lose out but the developers.

My main focus is on the number of sites for which planning applications have been granted yet nothing seems to have happened. There is no great reason for that—there are no infrastructure blockages or any of the other reasons outlined tonight by other Members. It is just land agents sitting on top of blocks of land with planning applications, and God only knows what is happening other than that they are trying to extract the best possible price from developers. That is not acceptable. If a site has a successful planning application and there is no good reason why it is not being developed, it should be developed to meet housing needs.

Another key point is that on many sites developers seem to be building just 30 or 40 houses a year, regardless of the market conditions. They drip them out to a steady drumbeat of 30 or 40. That makes it more difficult to deliver against the five-year housing supply number and the local council’s annual build targets. Frustratingly, it does nothing to make houses more affordable for local people. The prices keep going up. The Government are being robbed of their whole aim of building more houses and making them affordable, because we are dependent on a large number of developers who have got us by the throat. They decide how many houses enter the local supply chain, and nobody else. That is not right.

I urge the Minister to get tough with the developers. We want to build houses that are affordable and available to buy, and it should not just be down to developers to dictate planning policy and tell us what ultimately is going to happen. We are the Government. We decide. This is something we care passionately about.

My other key point is that I want councils to be imaginative about provision of affordable homes, and not simply pass over responsibility to housing associations. They should not just pass the buck, pass the cash and hope it all comes out in the end. I want councils to ensure that there are more affordable homes to buy, to allow people to get on the housing ladder, have a stake in the game, feel part of their community and own part of that community. It is not acceptable for a council to say that it is building 30% affordable homes, when that provision is being made by housing associations, which are often very unresponsive to the needs of local people. Councils must understand that we as a Government want affordable homes to be owned by people, to give those people the opportunity to trade up.

I can see that the throat of my hon. Friend the Member for Beverley and Holderness is starting to go again, and I do not want to make the cough any worse. I am delighted to see the Minister in his place. I know that he is committed to housing. As an MP for a Greater London constituency he knows the pain of not being able to get on the housing ladder more than many other people in this House. I wish him well in his endeavours, but he needs to know that we on the Conservative Benches will support the Government provided that we see the Government doing everything they can to get those houses built.

8.42 pm

William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I am pleased to be able to speak on Second Reading of the Bill, which I broadly welcome. I support its main aims of making the housing market work better for everybody, helping to identify and free up more land to build homes, and speeding up the delivery of the new homes that are so badly needed in many areas of the country. Those aspects of the Bill will help to improve the planning system to make it easier to deliver the Government’s ambition of 1 million new homes by the end of this Parliament.

When I arrived in the House last year a sage senior colleague advised me never to get involved in planning matters. Although that may be very sound advice on conservatories and house extensions, it is none the less our duty to ensure that we play a full role in the scrutiny of the Bill. With that in mind, it is good so see such a strong new ministerial team on the Treasury Bench; I look forward to engaging with that team constructively.

I also support the Government’s manifesto commitment to encourage communities to be more engaged in neighbourhood planning, particularly as a vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for civic societies. Community engagement is vital; we need it to build homes and infrastructure while ensuring that that is done in a way that is sympathetic and sensitive to the wishes of local communities. In my view, that will mean that we can build more, not less, as developers and local authorities ensure communities are brought on board at
an early stage and are therefore more likely to support developments. That process is under way in Marple in my constituency.

There is no magic wand to solve the housing shortage. It will require many years of investment, hard work and difficult choices, and while Government play a role, ultimately the work is done by those building houses: the developers. To my mind, there are three ways that developers are stalling in the process to deliver the homes we need at the rate required. The first is land banking, which many hon. Members have mentioned, whereby developers buy up land, often brownfield sites suitable for building and sometimes with planning permissions already granted, but do not build on it, either because they have priorities elsewhere or because they are waiting for the value to increase.

The second issue is when developers are keen to build, but there are delays between the granting of an outline application and the submission of the full planning application. Thirdly, once planning approval has been granted, there can be delays from developers in starting construction, which can sometimes be the result of deliberate land banking, as I have mentioned. These delays cannot always be laid at the door of the planning system, which is a common cry of developers. Developers must take some responsibility themselves. However, measures from the Government to encourage developers to reduce delays are welcome, and these are contained in the Bill.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In Northern Ireland we have a planning system that enables social housing to be set aside in each new development for private house building. When it comes to social housing and those who cannot afford a new house but need a rented house, does the hon. Gentleman feel that some of the land in a development should be set aside for that purpose?

William Wragg: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. That is something that my local authority in Stockport is looking at, to ensure it can use its land assets for the development of housing, so I agree with him on that.

One thing missing from the Bill, although certainly not from our debate this evening, is the issue of the green belt. We know that green-belt land is protected under the Town and Country Planning Act 1947, and it plays an important role in protecting the environment and semi-rural communities, such as the ones I represent, from urban sprawl. Fundamentally, the green belt preserves natural green land, open spaces, wildlife habitats and the character of such areas.

Although it is not currently addressed by the Bill, I am deeply concerned about the threat posed to the local green belt in my constituency by potential massive building development. For instance, the Greater Manchester spatial framework, a policy of the Greater Manchester combined authority, which my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) referred to, will determine where residential development can take place, including the release of green-belt land. The policy could threaten large areas of green belt in my constituency. I am concerned by the prospect of thousands of properties being built on previously protected land, especially in the High Lane and Marple areas of my constituency. There are significant doubts about whether already stretched local infrastructure could support such development.

Saying that, there is no doubt that we need more housing. However, the areas that should be developed first are brownfield sites, which are those areas previously used for other purposes. Stockport has many such sites that have not yet been developed for housing, and across the country it is conservatively estimated that there is enough brownfield land for the development of some 650,000 properties, making a significant contribution to the Government’s target. I therefore want to ask my hon. Friend the Minister, if this is not covered in the Bill, what is being done or can be done to prioritise brownfield development and to protect green belts from over-zealous local authority plans, such as that in Greater Manchester. I can only hope that development in the green belt in my constituency will be as sparse as Members on the Opposition Benches are this evening.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I welcome this Bill. The importance it places on neighbourhood plans validates the extremely hard and challenging work that so many of my constituents in the village of Brereton and the town of Sandbach have undertaken, in some cases over years, to develop neighbourhood plans and have them adopted. I congratulate them. Other areas in my constituency are working on their neighbourhood plans, which are vital in a constituency with distinct and individual local communities, lying as it does in a relatively large unitary council, Cheshire East, which stretches from the fringe of Greater Manchester down towards Shropshire. If localism is to mean anything, it is important that the people who live in such towns and villages have a real say in the development of their communities.

Does this Bill go far enough? I want to challenge the Minister in one or two ways.

I am pleased to hear the Minister say that neighbourhood plans will be given “proper consideration” in the planning process, that “due weight” will be given to them and that they will have full effect. However, will he clarify precisely what that means where a large principal authority still has no local plan and no agreed housing supply numbers? My constituents who have gone to the trouble of preparing neighbourhood plans are asking whether, if there is no local plan and no agreed housing supply number, their plans should have the status and strength of a local plan when planning decisions are made. That is the critical question.

Without that reassurance, my constituents—particularly those in Sandbach, who are besieged by developers and who have gone far beyond making what I believe is a reasonable contribution to housing numbers in the Cheshire East area—are saying they are becoming “very disillusioned” with the neighbourhood planning process. They quote a recent planning decision in September with respect to an area of land in Sandbach. The inspector acknowledged that the Sandbach neighbourhood plan had been adopted, but said he would not examine the application in the light of that plan. Instead, he set it against the as-yet unadopted local plan with the housing supply number as yet not agreed, which relates to the whole Cheshire East area. According to my constituents, the inspector seems to be saying that the neighbourhood plan is “an irrelevance”. Will the Minister look again at strengthening the authority of neighbourhood plans where there is no completed local plan and no
agreed five-year land supply, and declare that the
neighbourhood plan has the weight of a local plan
where there is no such plan in place?

My constituents have been encouraged by three recent
appeal decisions to the Secretary of State in East Sussex,
West Sussex and Bath. The Secretary of State cited
local plans in the appeals and prevented developments
highlighting neighbourhood plans as a key factor in his
decision. I thank the Minister for that and hope that it
indicates a trend of thinking in this area.

I support the references that have been made to land
banking, or, as I refer to it, permission banking. The
former mayor of Sandbach, Mike Benson, wrote to me
saying:

“During the Public Inquiries held in Sandbach...Cheshire
East’s Head of Planning Strategy...gave evidence that in some
parts of the Borough, planning permissions granted over the last
5 years”

had resulted in not one house being built in those
locations. Nevertheless, appeals continue to be allowed
across Cheshire East on the basis that Cheshire East
Council does not have a five-year housing supply. He
says:

“What would be fairer is a formula which regards the granting
of permissions as the determining factor, not the number of
houses actually being built.”

Will the Minister consider that as the Bill progresses?
Will he also consider the fact that it is very important to
ensure we balance the need for housing with the need
for employment land? Businessmen in Congleton tell
me that they need more employment land. We cannot
afford to have our communities turned into vast commuter
belts, because there are simply not the jobs for local
people to work in.

I have two final points. First, it is quite clear that in
some cases where developments are occurring, for example
in Congleton where 4,000 houses are projected to be
built in the draft local plan, we will need extra health
facilities. However, Cheshire East Council officers have
contacted Public Health England, which has been unable
to identify any community infrastructure levy-compliant
projects to which contributions could be sought for
development. It is very important that the Minister
liaises with his counterparts in the Department of Health
to ensure that health provision projects that can be used
for community infrastructure funding are in place.

If I may stretch your patience, Mr Deputy Speaker, I
would like to add one further point, which relates to an
issue I have been asked to raise by Cheshire East Council
on the importance of guiding developments so that they
avoid the most sensitive locations. I refer to a recent
decision by the Court of Appeal that renders protective
policies, such as green belt, green gap, wildlife conservation
and Jodrell Bank safeguarding, which is critical in my
constituency, as similar to “housing supply policies”. If
a local authority cannot demonstrate a five-year supply
of housing, such housing supply policies are deemed
out of date, carrying much less weight.

I have an appeal going through now to the Secretary
of State for a large development near Jodrell Bank.
Jodrell Bank is concerned that having many more houses
in the area will interfere with its instruments. It is a
critical, individual, specific issue, and that area needs
protection. It is important that that protection is not
weakened if the council is unable to resist housing in
unsuitable locations. Will the Minister clarify that the
Bill will ensure that such sensitive designations will not
be overridden and developers’ appeals will not be allowed?
Will he confirm that that will be embodied as an amendment
to the NPPF?

8.55 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I welcome my
constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member
for Croydon Central (Gavin Barwell), to his place; I am
delighted to see him on the Front Bench. I am also
glad to see the hon. Members for City of Durham
(Tristram Hunt), and for Erith and Thamesmead
(Teresa Pearce), fighting the fight from the Opposition
Front Bench. I recall with fondness the many hours we
spent this time last year on the Housing and Planning
Bill Committee.

I draw the House’s attention to my entry in the
Register of Members’ Financial Interests: I have a
shareholding in a company that finances construction
projects.

I welcome the power that the first part of the Bill on
neighbourhood plans will place in the hands of local
communities. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister to
consider strengthening that power further in two ways.
First, the preamble to the Bill says that in all but
exceptional circumstances local authorities are expected
to grant planning permission only in conformity with a
neighbourhood plan, but if permission is granted in
contradiction to a neighbourhood plan, I ask that it be
made clear that it would be expected that the Secretary
of State would call that in as a matter of routine, in
order to create a clear incentive for local planning
authorities to respect neighbourhood plans.

Secondly, is there any way to strengthen further
neighbourhood plans in relation to local plans, given
that neighbourhood plans will, by definition, have been
passed by local referendum? The stronger they are in
relation to local plans, the better. I fully accept that the
local plan must be respected when it comes to total
housing supply, but on questions of detail, I wonder
whether the neighbourhood plan should trump the
local plan, providing that it would not damage overall
housing supply. The Minister will know some examples
from our borough of where that might happen.

I say gently to the hon. Member for Erith and
Thamesmead that pre-commencement conditions are
frequently a significant problem. The bureaucracy they
create ties us both to the local planning authority office
and developments. When I intervened earlier, I touched
briefly on a couple of examples—the notorious cases of
bat and newt studies. Bat studies can be done only at
a certain time of year, so some developments get held
up for an entire year while the bat survey gets done. As for
newts, the greater crested newt is apparently an endangered
species across Europe. It is not an endangered species in
the United Kingdom, as the wretched creature pops up
on every site for development as a potential reason for
delay. If the Minister could give serious consideration
to making sure that the requirements relating to bats,
newts and similar creatures were proportionate and
appropriate, it would help to expedite the construction
of housing in our country.
I agree with the point made by the hon. Lady about resources for local planning departments. The hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) also correctly pointed out that resources in those departments are under great pressure. They do not have enough officers, time or resources, and that is a real constraint on the granting of planning consents. Although I am not of course usually in favour of any taxes or fees, many developers would be willing pay significantly higher planning fees if they were ring-fenced to fund local planning offices and attached to a particular service level—so if a planning decision were delivered within a certain time, a higher fee would be payable.

As Louis XIV’s Finance Minister, Colbert, said, the art of taxation is about plucking the goose so as to produce the least possible amount of hissing; well, here is a goose that is begging to be plucked. The goose, if I may put it this way, wants to pay extra money to have these decisions made more quickly. It wants to pay more fees. That would help local authority planning departments, as they would then be properly resourced. I would be grateful if the Minister could respond to that point in his concluding remarks. I shall trespass no further on the House’s time or patience, and conclude with that point.

9 pm

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): Beneath the thatch and clay tiles, in the shady byways and cobbled marketplaces of North West Hampshire, people are breathing a little easier as this Bill starts its passage. I would go so far as to say that on the village hall wall, next to the portrait of the Queen and the newly hoisted portrait of the Minister with responsibility for broadband, my right hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock), they are making space for a picture of the Minister for Housing and Planning, because he has, as the hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) said, finally taken a big step in bringing some sanity to what has previously been a gamble of a planning system.

We managed to get ourselves into a high-stakes game of poker between developers, councils, landowners and the Planning Inspectorate, and the compromise that emerged was often unsatisfactory to local residents, extremely expensive, and bureaucratic. That injected a sense of tension and an adversarial tone into the planning system, which should be constructive, in all senses of the word, and try to build the homes that we need.

The Government’s great peace offering to local people was the neighbourhood plan. Nowhere has embraced neighbourhood planning as strongly as my constituency, and the string of pearls running down the A303 from Oakley, Overton and Whitchurch down to Andover. We are destined to take tens of thousands of houses there over the next 20 or 30 years. Those places are embracing neighbourhood planning as the only way that they can see of making sure that planning is done with them, rather than to them.

Notwithstanding that, some ridiculous decisions have been taken in my constituency over the last year or so. In Oakley, just seven days before the referendum on the neighbourhood plan, which had been three years in the making, the Planning Inspectorate allowed an appeal for a slab development of 80 houses, which drove a coach and horses through the plan. The community might as well not have bothered. At that stage, people in the village had already voted by post, yet they knew that permission had gone through. I am very pleased that this Minister and his predecessor took on board the concerns of lots of Members, particularly rural Members, about the need to strengthen such plans.

I would like to raise with the Minister a couple of areas where the Bill could be given even greater strength. The interaction of the different actors I mentioned and the interaction between neighbourhood plans and local plans are absolutely key. Many Members have talked about providing some kind of stick to make sure that councils have a local plan in place. Thus far, neighbourhood plans are pretty pointless without the local plan being in place. Too many councils do not have them.

I wonder whether we could offer councils an incentive, rather than a stick. Where a village has put a neighbourhood plan together and it has been approved, where a borough has a local plan that has been approved, and where there  is a five-year land supply, there should be a double lock, whereby the Planning Inspectorate has no remit. These people are playing ball. They have said, “Yes, we will take the houses. This is where we want them, and this is the size and mix we want.” That has all been approved by the Planning Inspectorate, so why should a speculative developer, with an ability to pay legal fees and for hearings, and with QCs on tap, be able to come along and bully the council into reaching some kind of compromise? The council knows that if it goes to the Planning Inspectorate, the decision may not go its way, and is worried about the fines it faces if it loses. A double lock would be a way of freeing people from the man in the suit from Bristol; that would be an enormous incentive. There would certainly be a huge amount of pressure from local residents on borough councils to get a neighbourhood plan, so as to protect the residents. I put that proposal on the Minister's plate.

My second point is on getting local people to accept housing estates. Neighbourhood planning certainly makes people much more accepting of housing, but the Government’s admirable starter homes scheme could be used to get even more acceptance. When starter homes are built as part of a development—I will have a huge development with lots of starter homes outside Basingstoke in my constituency—anybody from anywhere in the country can apply for them. How about we give local people a short period of perhaps 28 days after completion in which they have first dibs on the houses built in their neighbourhood? That way, the children and relatives of local people—people who can prove a local connection—could snap up those houses first. It would go a long way to getting people over the line, particularly as regards the large-scale developments I will have, if they have that incentive, on a generational basis.

My final point, which I would be grateful if the Minister could address, is on the provision of broadband in new developments. I raised the issue in debates on the Digital Economy Bill. It seems mad to me that we are not putting broadband compulsorily into all developments, particularly large scale, speculative developments. I agree that we should make developers provide fibre to premises in all developments, particularly large
The Government are pumping billions into the housing industry over the next few years—rightly, because we need more houses. That will inflate the housing industry, and there will be a lot more activity and a lot more money to be made. The least developers could do is absorb the cost of putting future-proofed broadband in those houses. If we can get those measures into this great Bill, we will have something that neighbourhoods, particularly in North West Hampshire, will welcome. They will wave aloft the Bill as they hoist the Minister’s portrait in the village hall.

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), who made important points about the local development plan process, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and my right hon. Friend the Member for W est Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin). My constituency is a tale of two halves. The half that is in the Cheshire West and Chester Council area is protected by a local development plan. The numerous beautiful areas in my constituency that have put their neighbourhood plans in place have a protection that is not afforded to the other half of my constituency, which is in the Cheshire East Council area. Without an LDP, the neighbourhood plans do not have the same legal status. I join other hon. Members in urging the Minister to ensure that neighbourhood plans carry full protection and force.

I agree with the suggestion for an incentive. When Cheshire West and Chester Council was run by Conservatives, a proportion—10%—of the new homes bonus automatically went to the local parish council to allow it to improve amenities. I urge the Minister to consider putting that proportion in the Bill, because it allowed my local communities to make improvements to their area when they could see a direct result from new housing. For example, Tattenhall in my constituency would have used the money to build six homes for rent for local people in the agricultural community—they would have been permanent protected homes available for young people, allowing them to stay in their farming communities. Unfortunately, the council has switched to Labour control, and has swiped the whole of the new homes bonus. It will not now go to my local communities that are bearing the brunt of the housing development. I, too, have a string of pearls in my constituency—wonderful villages such as Bunbury, Audlem, Tattenhall, Malpas and Tarporley, which developers are desperate to develop. It is vital that those communities that accept housing see a direct benefit from it. I urge the Minister therefore to consider allocating a proportion of the new homes bonus to those communities. Ten per cent. is not unreasonable, and would give an incentive to people to accept development.

Finally, I urge the Minister to crack down hard on developers who repeatedly put in applications against neighbourhood plans, knowing that they are acting against an adopted neighbourhood or local plan. If planning permission is turned down by the local council, and the developer appeals unsuccessfully and is turned down again, I urge the Minister to consider penalty costs against them. A third of those costs could go to local councils; that could contribute towards alleviating the legal costs that they incur trying to fight these appeals. Another third could go to his Department to provide the resource that is needed for it to look at those appeals, and the final third could go to the Treasury to deal with the infrastructure impact of other developments. That would be a real win.

I urge the Minister to look at that in the Bill, because my constituents are frustrated when they see a planning process in which developers have deep involvement. They think that it is an unfair fight, with no incentive for councils to appeal against decisions or stand up to what they regard as bully developers. Not all developers are the same—we have many good developers in Cheshire—but the feeling among local people is that they are fighting a tide of applications that are swamping them. Some form of disincentive to tackle those repeated applications would, I hope, go some way towards discouraging that type of behaviour.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach). I fully support the provisions of the Bill, and I congratulate Ministers on giving people unprecedented power over planning. It is clear that this is a power not to limit development, but to decide where properties will go and what infrastructure is required. It is a power to decide how it looks—design is a key element in persuading local communities to support new housing in their area.

I welcome the Bill’s giving more weight to neighbourhood plans, which, as detailed in clause 1, will be effective earlier in the process. However, there is a conundrum, as colleagues have mentioned, but, as is not uncommon in this House, I will mention it again. An area may have an effective neighbourhood plan that works with the numbers given by the district in its local plan, but it may not be able to demonstrate a five-year land supply. In those circumstances, would it not be appropriate to give full protection to a neighbourhood that delivers those numbers within the overall context of the local plan? That would be a great incentive for local communities to develop a neighbourhood plan and deliver the extra houses that are important to our communities and our national economy.

The neighbourhood planning process is dealt with in clause 5. Local authorities can give help, support and advice to neighbourhood planning steering committees. Some local authorities are less keen than others on neighbourhood plans, and regard them as an encumbrance. Would it be possible to provide some formal training, perhaps delivered centrally? I was delighted when my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell), who has been such an advocate of neighbourhood plans, came to my constituency to talk to local steering groups about how to develop them. As a result of his intervention, we now have some neighbourhood plans back on track.
I also think that small and medium-sized enterprises should be given more help. As we know, SME developers used to build 100,000 houses a year, whereas today they build about 20,000. They are critical to the supply element of the equation. I understand that the idea of extra financial support for SMEs has been mooted in connection with the autumn statement, because lack of finance constitutes one of their biggest difficulties when it comes to developing new homes, but another of their difficulties relates to land, and finding suitable small sites. The whole planning system seems to be stacked against SMEs. It is far simpler to build houses on allocated land than to build them on the windfall sites. It is far simpler to build houses on sites. The whole planning system seems to be stacked against SMEs. It is far simpler to build houses on allocated land than to build them on the windfall sites on which SMEs tend to develop them, but such sites are few and far between.

SMEs are important not just in terms of the number of houses that are delivered, but in terms of their contribution to local communities. They employ local people: local suppliers and local apprentices—SMEs account for a much higher percentage of penetration of apprenticeships per completion than larger developers—and local consultants as well. There are plenty of good reasons for the provision of more small sites that would be suitable for SME house builders, and there are a number of ways in which we could do that. It is frustrating that one of the local authorities in my constituency concentrates all its housing on large allocated sites, rather than spreading the load around the towns and villages for the purpose of not just sustainable development but sustainable communities.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman has mentioned sustainable communities in the context of planning. Does he agree with Dame Alice Hudson, the head teacher at Twyford Church of England High School in my constituency? The school wants to expand, but feels that it is stymied by planning legislation. It has identified the site for a badly needed new high school, but at present there is opposition because of housing that will come with it. Dame Alice says that there must be a way of helping the school to provide more performance and other facilities for the local community. Does the hon. Gentleman agree with me, and with my constituent, that there should be more joined-up thinking?

Kevin Hollinrake: I definitely agree that there should be more community engagement. However, although many people in smaller villages and towns want more development, the policies of local authorities prevent that from happening, which is entirely counter-intuitive. The lack of new development puts schools, shops and public houses at risk. I wonder how we can influence local authorities and encourage them to spread the load around our smaller communities as well. Alternatively, could not a percentage of one of the larger sites—10% or 20%—be allocated to SME developers, so that they could meet some of the needs of larger communities?

Those are some thoughts for the new Housing Minister. SMEs are critical to the successful delivery of the houses that we need in the United Kingdom. However, I am happy to support the measures in the Bill and the ideas behind them.

9.18 pm

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): It is a delight and a pleasure to see the Minister for Housing and Planning, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon Central (Gavin Barwell), sitting on the Front Bench. I have known him for 20 or 25 years, since he worked in the environmental research department of Conservative central office. He was also the special adviser in the department, and he has been following this issue for a long time.

I must declare an interest. As is shown in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests, I still have some shares in a public relations consultancy which advised developers on how to obtain planning permission. I have to say that I have also worked for the opposition, notably in Fulham. However, I have a fairly good understanding of the importance of taking the local community with you to get a planning application through.

One of the best people I ever came across was a man called David Prout, who was in the Department. He was also the director of planning at the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea when we were trying to do a development on what was known as the Tesco tower on the West Cromwell Road. We had failed to get planning permission, and he eventually decided that we needed to produce a master plan in order to ensure that the local community was very much engaged in the whole process. In such cases, it is important to talk not only about the design but about the other community facilities that will be made available. I therefore urge my hon. Friend the Minister to ensure that as we seek to put housing development in place, we also look at other issues such as community facilities. I shall say more about design in a moment.

I am the chairman of the all-party group for excellence in the built environment, and we have just published an important piece of work on the quality of housing. I am pretty unique—[Hon. Members: “Hear, hear!”] I am pretty unique on the Conservative Benches in that I represent a totally inner-city seat. The only piece of countryside in my constituency is the Ponderosa pony sanctuary, which, to be honest, is just a rather muddy field. However, I have a large amount of parkland, which was developed by the Victorians and is absolutely wonderful. What is so super about it is that it has space and the settings of the properties are absolutely brilliant.

We need to recognise that if local authorities grant planning permission, that should not be the end of the matter. They must also ensure that the developers produce the development for which they have been given the planning permission. All too often, companies build up land banks but do not do anything with them. I therefore urge my hon. Friend the Minister to consider a proposal whereby a local authority could charge a developer business rates if it had not produced the development, having got people’s expectations up. Developers should not be allowed to have property sitting around doing nothing. It is not good enough simply to get planning permission; getting the property developed is the most important thing. That is what we on this side of the House will be judged on.

We also need to ensure that we have good-quality design. I have a lot of new build in my constituency, thanks to the party opposite. When Labour was in power, it provided a lot of money for new development down in Devonport. I have to say that I am appalled by some of that development. There is brown mould on some of the buildings, and I hear stories of windows and doors that do not fit. The other day I even heard of
[Oliver Colvile]

an instance of sewage going in underneath the floorboards. That is not good enough. This is one of the reasons that I am looking forward to talking to my hon. Friend the Minister about the all-party group’s report. We must ensure that we have better-quality buildings, rather than shoddy developments that could become the slums of the future. We need to have quality in our design as well as quantity.

I also want to encourage the Government to consider ways of getting local authorities to appoint someone to review the quality of the building and design in their area. I have been very lucky. I went to the most beautiful school in the whole country: Stowe. It has the most beautiful Palladian architecture; it is absolutely fantastic. I am not arguing that we should have Palladian architecture throughout the whole country—well, I probably am, actually—but we need to ensure that the volume house builders do not simply build the same factory-produced developments all over the country. I am passionate about this. It is vital that we give people a sense of belonging in their communities, and we need to ensure that we have quality development that will also deliver good community facilities such as doctors surgeries and village halls. It is vital that neighbourhood planning should be done in the round, rather than in isolation.

9.24 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I thank all Members—they were mostly Government Members—who have contributed to this debate. They did an excellent job speaking up for their constituencies and the various planning issues that affect them, and extolling the virtues of neighbourhood planning. My hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann) also did an excellent job in explaining how important neighbourhood planning was to his constituency and the need for local plans to refer to it. I was also grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) who, as always, pointed out exactly what was wrong with the Bill, what needs to be improved and how we need to support planning more effectively.

I am rather surprised to be speaking again on planning legislation so soon after our proceedings on the Housing and Planning Act 2016. After all, the ink is barely dry on the paper. However, as there have been six pieces of planning legislation in the past six years, I perhaps should not be that surprised.

The Minister said that he wants to have shovels put in the ground, but I am not sure that this is the Bill to do it. Indeed, the Bill is much more interesting for what is not in it than for what is. I am not sure whether it represents—in the words of the Secretary of State earlier—“action on many fronts”. In fact, his own colleagues came up with quite a substantial list of things that should have been in this Bill. They thought that there should be something about infrastructure and how it could be funded effectively to underpin developments and something about carbon-neutral housing. They felt that local plans should have a strong relationship with neighbourhood plans, or that neighbourhood plans should trump local plans, and that there should be a green-belt review. There was some suggestion that there should be a statutory footing for local plans and deadlines for their delivery. There were other suggestions that the Bill should cover broadband in developments, the use of vacant public sector land, how to protect hedgehogs, how to pluck geese, how to repeal applications, how to use fees more effectively, land banking and permission banking, the failure to address Brexit, and a call-in procedure for neighbourhood plans. Those were just some of the issues that were raised, so there is a lot to be addressed by the new Minister, whom I welcome to his post. I look forward to working with him in Committee on improving the Bill.

We strongly welcome the measures to strengthen neighbourhood planning. We all agree that communities should be at the heart of development and that development should start with our neighbourhoods. Any measure that will strengthen neighbourhood planning should be welcomed. Too many people think that planning is done to them, and we need to return to a much happier place in which communities feel that they and their representatives have some control over planning.

There are a few issues about neighbourhood planning that I hope to address in Committee. We need to look at whether it is being properly resourced, and whether the links to local plans are strong enough. We welcome the opportunity of a planning register that will allow for better scrutiny of permitted development and, in particular, the scale of use of permitted development. The Government Front-Bench team will know that we have a long-standing objection to permitted development being used for the delivery of housing in this country. Indeed, we would not need a register if we did not use permitted development in the way that it is used, as all homes would have to go through the planning process properly, and there would be some control of the infrastructure that supports them and the quality and standards of the properties being built. However, as the Government are using permitted development, it seems sensible for a register to be in place.

One of our main bugbears with the Bill is that it does not sufficiently recognise the difficulties that local planning departments are facing as a result of the lack of resources to carry out their responsibilities. Ministers would be living in a cupboard if they did not know that right across the housing and planning sector, developers large and small, a large number of agencies and planning departments are saying that the lack of resource for planning departments is the major spanner in the works for delivery. Since 2010 spending on planning by local authorities has almost halved, from £2.2 billion in 2010 to £1.2 billion last year. The Royal Town Planning Institute, the Local Government Association, the Town and Country Planning Association and the British Property Federation have all pointed to the fact that greater expectations must mean greater support for planning, yet the opposite is happening. Planning fees are vital to plug the gap.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: Would the hon. Lady support greater flexibility for each local authority to be able to set its own planning fees to meet its own circumstances, and possibly to allow higher fees to give accelerated results?

Dr Blackman-Woods: Indeed. That was one of the amendments that I tabled to the Housing and Planning Bill when it was going through the House. Alas, it was rejected by the then Housing Minister. It was interesting
to hear the same point being made earlier in our discussion. I am pleased if Conservative Members are coming round to our view that planning departments should be able to set fees at full recovery level.

On a more positive note, we welcome the measures to streamline compulsory purchase orders. The new Ministers must have been studying their copy of the Lyons review. We argued strongly there that CPOs were not fit for purpose and needed to be streamlined. I am pleased to see those measures in the Bill but, again, they could be improved.

I want to spend a minute or two on pre-commencement planning conditions, which is the area of the Bill on which we will probably have most discussion in Committee. I am pleased that the right hon. Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) is in his place. He criticised pre-commencement planning conditions at length, yet I have a list from a development taking place in my constituency and I cannot see what is wrong with any of these conditions. The developers have to provide samples of materials. The development is in a conservation area, so that is important. They have to provide full details about bats. Well, we must protect bats. There must be noise mitigation and notice of demolition.

Gavin Barwell: The hon. Lady gives the example of notice of materials. I can entirely see why that is a legitimate issue if the development is in a conservation area, but why must that be settled before a spade goes into the ground and the groundsworks start?

Dr Blackman-Woods: That is a question that I would like the Minister to put to his constituents. People surrounding new developments very much want to know what the development looks like, what the quality of the build will be, what materials are going to be used and whether they fit into the surrounding landscape. If he is serious about neighbourhood planning and giving people a say over what happens in their area, pre-commencement planning is important. Some of the measures could lead to more delays in the planning system, rather than speeding it up, which I think is what the Minister is trying to do.

Kevin Hollinrake: The hon. Lady mentioned landscape. One of my SME developers was required to submit a landscape scheme before starting on the development itself, as a pre-commencement condition. Does she not see that some of these conditions are completely inappropriate?

Dr Blackman-Woods: The problem is that we do not know why the local authority required that particular condition. It could have been worried that no plan might ever be produced.

John Mann: I recall that when I was knocking down and rebuilding a wall, for which I required planning permission, I was expected to provide a sample of brick to set down full recovery level because I did not have planning permission. Is there not the potential for some compromise between the two sides on this?

Dr Blackman-Woods: Certainly not is the answer to that question—absolutely not.

In conclusion, we think that it is a real pity that the Bill does not contain more about infrastructure and how to deliver garden cities and new towns, but we look forward to having those discussions with the Minister in Committee. We do not intend to divide the House tonight, but we will see what happens in Committee.

9.36 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell): This has been an excellent debate, with contributions from 18 colleagues on the Government Benches. My right hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Sir Oliver Letwin) and my hon. Friends the Members for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) and for The Cotswolds (Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) got to the heart of the matter: the interaction between neighbourhood plans and local plans, and particularly the issue of the five-year land supply. We will want to return to that issue as the Bill goes through Parliament.

We should be honest that there is a tension here. On the one hand, clearly we cannot expect our constituents to put a huge amount of work into neighbourhood plans if they do not hold weight in certain situations. On the other hand, if there is a local authority that either does not have a plan, or that has a wholly deficient plan that does not meet housing need in its area, any Member of this House who cares as passionately as we do about building the homes this country needs cannot allow such a situation to persist for years and years. That is a difficult issue, and I think that the suggestion of a mix of carrots and sticks is probably the right way to address it.

Sir Oliver Letwin: Does my hon. Friend think that there is at least a potential for the NPPF to be used as the reference point under those circumstances?

Gavin Barwell: I certainly do, and I think that there are ways we could look at addressing the issue, either through the Bill or through policy changes. I am very conscious of what the problem is, and I am sure that we can work together to find a solution as the Bill goes through.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Mrs Villiers) spoke passionately about the green spaces in her constituency. She also sought reassurance on pre-commencement conditions, which I can provide. The consultation paper states:

“This measure will not restrict the ability of local planning authority to propose pre-commencement conditions that may be necessary—for example, conditions in relation to archaeological investigations or wildlife surveys.”

So there is protection there.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr Bacon) spoke with his customary passion about the importance of custom build. My hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) asked about support for groups producing neighbourhood plans. We have made £22.5 million available between 2015 and 2018. I can reassure him that that money will go directly to the groups doing the relevant work.

So there is protection there.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Chris Green) said that the view of his constituents was, “Enough housing, infrastructure required.” I half agree with them; it is absolutely right that we must get a much better linkage between the provision of infrastructure in return
for taking more housing, but I cannot agree that we have enough housing in this country. We need more housing, but the infrastructure must go with it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Pudsey (Stuart Andrew), who is such a fantastic advocate for his constituency, spoke with passion about the difficulties it is facing. It is certainly the case that neighbourhood plans must be consistent with the relevant local plan, but he tested the issues in relation to the green belt. If he will forgive me, I cannot talk about the particular plan, because it may well cross my desk at some point, but if I can talk in the generality, we would expect inspectors to test the figure for objectively assessed need and to test whether the circumstances in which an authority seeks to change green-belt boundaries meet the test in the NPPF, which is that they should be exceptional circumstances.

Dr Huq: The Minister mentioned green-belt de-designation, and I just wondered whether he had any thoughts on metropolitan open land. Twyford C of E High School in my constituency, which I mentioned, has identified a new site—a disused Barclays sports ground—but the school is tied up in knots because of the land’s status.

Gavin Barwell: Metropolitan open land is a status that is specific to Greater London, but it holds the same weight, effectively, in Greater London as green belt. If the hon. Lady were to consult the London plan, similar circumstances should apply in terms of its de-designation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) showed his huge experience in this area in his contribution. He made a number of constructive suggestions, which we will certainly look at.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Warwickshire (Craig Tracey) raised issues around the calculation of assessed need and in particular in relation to migration. The population projection figures do assume a fall in migration. While migration is clearly a factor, about a third of household growth nationally is due to net migration, so even if there were no migration into the country, there would still be significant pressure for more housing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) made two very powerful points. The first was about build-out rates. As a Government, we want to listen to developers and to address evidenced concerns about things that are slowing up development, be it pre-commencement conditions, the time it takes to agree section 106 agreements or concerns about utilities. However, if we do all those things, I think we have a right to turn to the development industry and ask what it is going to do to raise its game in terms of the speed with which it builds out. My hon. Friend also made another critical point, which is that, when we talk about affordable housing, yes, council and housing association housing are a part of that, but what most of our constituents want is a home that is affordable to buy, and he was absolutely right to stress that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (William Wragg) made the powerful point that this problem is going to take time to solve. There is no quick switch that anyone can throw to deal with it. He rightly wanted to hear more about what we can do to focus development on brownfield land. The Act that received Royal Assent earlier this year set up the principle of brownfield registers, where local authorities will set out clearly the brownfield land that is available in their areas and suitable for housing development.

My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), and Opposition Members as well, referred to resourcing for planning departments, and that is something the Government have consulted on. As part of the White Paper, we will want to come forward with a response to that consultation.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): Are we going to intervene in the case of indolent councils that claim they have the right resources but continually fail to provide a local or a neighbourhood plan, which we will certainly not see until the end of next year at the earliest? Can we bring in a planning inspector sooner?

Gavin Barwell: The Government have signalled that we will intervene early in 2017, potentially, on councils that do not have local plans in place. The Secretary of State talked about that issue and about our determination to take it forward.

My hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) raised the critical issue of broadband, and I hope I can provide him with some reassurance on it. We have legislated through the building regulations to require that, from January 2017, all new buildings, including homes and major renovations, include in-building physical infrastructure. We are also legislating to introduce a new broadband universal service obligation to ensure people can request an affordable connection at a minimum speed from a designated provider. There are therefore measures in place, and I am happy to discuss them with him and to check that they reassure him on that vital issue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) talked about the importance of incentivising communities by seeing a proportion of the uplift in land value going back to the community. I do not know whether her council has adopted the community infrastructure levy, but if it has, there is a proportion—15%—that goes to the local area, and that increases to 25% if the relevant local community has a neighbourhood plan.

My hon. Friend the Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) made an absolutely vital point about the importance of small sites. If we want to get small builders involved in greater numbers, it is about not just financing but releasing small sites.

Finally on the Government side of the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) made the absolutely critical point that this is about quality as well quantity, and that if we build beautiful buildings, it will encourage communities to go for growth.

Turning very briefly to the Opposition, there is no doubting the passion of Labour Members in addressing our housing problems, but several things were said that show their policy prescriptions sometimes do not match such ambition. I entirely understand concerns about permitted developments, but it is worth putting on the record that we have had over 11,000 permitted development applications. We do not know the number of homes
involved—we want to collect data on that—but reform of permitted developments has made a significant contribution to increasing the housing supply.

We have also heard concerns about the duty to co-operate. I know that that is difficult, but for a core urban area that cannot meet all its housing need, it is vital that surrounding areas play their part. Getting rid of the duty to co-operate might mean not providing the housing we need in such areas.

Finally, concerns were raised about planning conditions. The shadow Secretary of State asked for data, and I have had time to dig some out. A survey of small and medium-sized builders carried out by the National House Building Council reported that 34% of them were concerned about the time to clear conditions and 29% of them were concerned about the extent of those conditions, so there is real evidence of concern on that issue.

In conclusion, last week the Secretary of State set out the first step in our plan to get this country building the homes it desperately needs. This Bill is the second step. We entirely accept that it is not on its own a solution to the problem and, later in the autumn, we will publish a White Paper. However, the fact is that for years and years we have not built enough homes in this country. The consequences for the ability of young people to get on to the housing ladder have been dramatic: 50% of 45-years-old owned their own home by the time they were 30, but only 39% of 35-years-old owned their own home by the time they were 30 and the projection is that 45-years-old owned their own home by the time they were 30, but only 39% of 35-years-old owned their own home by the time they were 30 and the projection is that 26% of 25-years-old will own their own home by the time they are 30. This Government are determined to build a country that works for everyone, and critical to that will be creating a housing market that works for everyone. The Bill is an important step in a wider plan to deliver that critical ambition for the future of this country.

*Question put and agreed to.*

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

**NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING BILL (PROGRAMME)**

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)).*  
That the following provisions shall apply to the Neighbourhood Planning 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 1 November 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 any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings on Consideration are commenced.

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

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

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. —(Heather Wheeler.)

*Question agreed to.*

**NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING 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 Neighbourhood Planning Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:

(a) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by a Minister of the Crown, a person holding office under Her Majesty or a government department, and

(b) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided. —(Heather Wheeler.)

*Question agreed to.*

**Business without Debate**

**DELEGATED LEGISLATION**

*Ordered,*

That the Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme (Amendment) Regulations 2016 (S.I., 2016, No. 718), be referred to a Delegated Legislation Committee. —(Heather Wheeler.)

**ADJOURNMENT (FEBRUARY)**

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 25).*

That this House, at its rising on Thursday 9 February 2017, do adjourn until Monday 20 February 2017. —(Heather Wheeler.)

*Question agreed to.*

**ENVIRONMENTAL AUDIT COMMITTEE**

*Ordered,*

That Rory Stewart be discharged from the Environmental Audit Committee and Dr Thérèse Coffey be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)

**COMMITTEE OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS**

*Ordered,*

That Harriett Baldwin be discharged from the Committee of Public Accounts and Simon Kirby be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)
School Admissions Code

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

9.49 pm

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for selecting me to speak on this matter this evening, some 13 months after I first raised it. Although the issues I intend to raise affect only a relatively small number of children, if they were resolved positively or we heard a positive response from the Minister tonight, it would undoubtedly improve the life chances of thousands of children in this country every year.

The definition of a summer-born child is one who is born between 1 April and 31 August. The key point at issue is that children must enter education on the September after their fifth birthday. Although many children are ready to do so, some are not. While no two summer-born or premature children have exactly the same needs, they face many common challenges: shortened attention span, delayed motor development, underdeveloped emotional maturity, smaller physical stature and ongoing medical issues. A wealth of academic research shows that summer-born children as a group lag significantly behind their older peers. Empirically and instinctively, it is easy to see why that is the case. With a gap of almost a year between the youngest and the oldest in a school year, it is unsurprising that the development of the youngest can be held back significantly.

The Minister will know that in 2014, his Department produced a study that showed that at the end of the first year in school, two thirds of summer-born children failed to meet the minimum standards in reading, writing, speaking, maths and other developmental skills. That compares with less than a third of those born between September and December.

Children who are the youngest in the year are disproportionately likely to report bullying and lower levels of self-confidence, and their overall satisfaction at school is significantly reduced. There has also been a higher incidence of diagnoses of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism among summer-born children. Most of the experts I have met believe that most of those diagnoses are the result of the child struggling from being placed in school too soon, being comparatively immature and struggling developmentally, rather than their suffering from the condition.

Almost exactly a year ago, but somewhat later at night, I was lucky enough to hold a debate on exactly the same subject, which I know the Minister will remember. I made three requests of him with regard to the admissions code. First, although I accept that there is no statutory barrier to a child being admitted outside their normal cohort, there is, as he knows, no right for the parents to insist or appeal. Secondly, several local authorities were insisting that although a child’s entry could be delayed, they would have to join year 1 and miss reception. Equally, some authorities said that although a child could delay entry by a year throughout their primary education, at secondary school level they would force the child to join their non-delayed cohort. The child would therefore start secondary education having missed a year of education. Finally, he will remember that I brought up the issue of prematurity in the context of summer-born children.

Most local authorities now allow summer-born children to start school a year later. However, many still demand a very high level of expert evidence for doing so. That is a barrier that many parents simply cannot pass. Most summer-born children are three and a half when their parents have to start applying for schools and decide when they should enter. That does not give much time for the experts, however skilled, to gauge a child’s strengths and needs. At that stage, the parents, who have assessed the child from birth, are probably in a better position to assess and make a decision about what is best for their child. At that early stage of a child’s life, parents have a real understanding of the abilities of their child and can judge whether they need extra time to develop.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a strong case, which I firmly support. The Minister announced last year his intention to amend the school admissions code. Does my hon. Friend share my disappointment that nothing has happened since? I have had various constituents chasing me, and I chased the Minister by writing to him on 6 July. Only last week I received a reply from Lord Nash, stating that the Department is giving the matter careful consideration and will announce its plans shortly. Is it not just taking too long? Another year of children starting school in September has been missed.

Stephen Hammond: I had hoped that progress might have been better, but it would be unfair on my hon. Friend the Minister to say that nothing has happened. He has met me on several occasions and pushed the case.

My hon. Friend could almost have been reading my speech, because I was about to remind the Minister of the issues that I raised last year, which I wish to raise with him again this evening. First, following that debate, he wrote a helpful letter to local authorities. The only problem is that a postcode lottery has developed. Some local authorities have been receptive to his letter, have taken the point that there is going to be a consultation, and have therefore looked to apply flexibility when a child should enter school. That has been very good news for a number of parents. Unfortunately, many other authorities have said, “Well, that is just a letter from the Minister, and a consultation may happen at some stage in the future,” but have taken absolutely no notice. In the past two days I have had emails flooding in from people across the country sharing radically different experiences.

Secondly, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) said, we need the timetable for the changes to the code. That would lead to the end of the postcode lottery, but more importantly it would allow parents some certainty in planning their child’s future.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman brought this subject to Westminster Hall a short time ago, and I supported him then and do so again tonight. We are all concerned about the angst of parents and pupils, and the educationalists—the teachers themselves—want to do away with the rigidity in the system and bring flexibility. Is that not what the Minister should do after tonight—bring about flexibility for everyone?
Stephen Hammond: I was grateful to the hon. Gentleman for taking part in the debate this time last year, and I am grateful to him for being here again this evening. What he describes is indeed what I want, and I think it is what the Minister wants. We are here to gently push the Minister slightly further in the right direction, slightly faster.

My third point is that, as the Minister will know, one real problem is that when local authorities agree to a child’s entry being delayed, they do not all allow that child to remain with the same cohort through their whole educational life.

Finally, I want to make the case once more that in the consultation the Minister should consider using a premature child’s due date for admissions rather than the date on which they were born. That would be a simple change but would change many children’s lives.

Following last year’s debate, the Minister helpfully wrote to local authorities up and down the country setting out the Government’s intention to amend the school admissions code to provide some more flexibility, which we would all like to see. Following that letter, a number of authorities, including Wandsworth, Cumbria, Liverpool, Yorkshire, Devon and even my own local authority of Merton, have been much more generous in allowing parents to choose when their child should start school. That has been a huge relief for parents and made a difference to a number of children, and I thank the Minister on their behalf. A parent from Hertfordshire wrote to me explaining that their local authority had made some quick and simple changes to admissions, which had allowed their premature child to start a year later.

I know from emails sent to me over the past month, however, that parents up and down the country are still experiencing a problem, as many local authorities are reluctant to change their policy until they are forced to do so by the Minister and the Department, and we see the change to the code. That is leading to the postcode lottery I described earlier, whereby whether someone’s child has the opportunity to reach their full potential depends on where someone lives—

10 pm

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

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

Stephen Hammond: I have heard examples of councils refusing to change their policy, or of children being allowed to start a year later but then being forced to skip year 7 in secondary school. I have seen local authorities still continue to place a huge burden of proof on parents in order to authorise their child starting a year later. As the Minister will know, academies operate their own admissions policy; although many have bought into the spirit of his letter, many also operate a policy that contributes to that postcode lottery.

Inevitably, the choice of school and of whether to delay entry are stressful for parents, especially those who see the problem of developmental delay for their children and wish to do the best for them. I urge the Minister to act as quickly as possible to provide some certainty to parents of summer-born children, particularly as many people will be about to make applications for next year. Those parents are weighing up whether to enter their children for reception now or to wait. That is a very difficult decision for parents, so I ask the Government to look at bringing forward the consultation rather more quickly.

The Minister will know that many local authorities will not give certainty to a child’s education even if they agree to a delay. It is absolutely key that he provides that certainty, particularly as some local authorities grant a delay but then force a child to enter year 1 rather than reception, or to go to year 8 at the end of year 6, rather than year 7. Again, if he could indicate that he intends to bring forward consultation on the code, that would be very helpful.

Finally, it is clear to me—I have made this case before—that a premature child’s due date should be used for admissions, rather than their birth date. Since my last Adjournment debate on this topic, a team at the University of Bristol has published research that looked at school exam and test results for children born prematurely, from key stage 1 all the way through to GCSEs. The team found that prematurity impacts on educational performance, and the effect is most dramatic in the early years. For those who are born extremely prematurely and fall into the wrong year group the gaps in attainment are even more pronounced.

Many premature children and their parents face challenges and difficulties throughout their lives. The simple change I am asking for could make a massive difference to those children’s educational attainment. The Minister will know that that change is fully supported by Bliss, a fantastic charity that has been working on this issue for a while. I thank Bliss for its campaign, and I hope the Minister will listen to Bliss tonight.

This is the second time that I have been grateful for the opportunity to raise these matters in the House. I think the problems are similar to those I raised last year. I am grateful for the letter the Minister wrote, but am hopeful that he will be able now to confirm the timetable, and say that the consultation will start soon and that he is prepared to accept these changes to the admissions code. I urge him to spell out how, in the interim, he intends to make sure that the postcode lottery resulting from his first letter can be done away with, so that parents making decisions now will have some certainty.

If we are successful tonight and these changes go ahead, we will improve the lives of thousands of children. They will be happier, more confident, more academically successful and more likely to reach their full potential.

10.4 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Nick Gibb): Thank you, Mr Bercow—Mr Speaker, rather; I beg your pardon. I am still recovering from Question Time earlier today.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond) on securing this debate on the admission of summer-born children, and pay tribute to him for leading the campaign to ensure that summer-born children and those born prematurely have the best and most appropriate start to their education. Again, he made a compelling case. I welcome this opportunity to explain the Government’s position, and to provide an update on next steps. I share his concerns about this issue, and would like to reassure him that we...
have been considering how we can take forward the changes announced last year to summer-born children’s entry to school.

As my hon. Friend is aware, admission authorities must provide for the admission of all children in the September following their fourth birthday. We know that most parents are happy for their children to go to school at this point, confident that they are ready for the classroom. Parents are, however, not obliged to send their child to school until they reach compulsory school age, which is the start of the term after their fifth birthday or, to be precise, the prescribed day after they turn five. Where parents feel their child is not ready to start school before compulsory school age, there are flexibilities in the system that enable them to defer the date on which their child is admitted to school until later in the reception year, or to arrange for them to attend on a part-time basis until they reach compulsory school age.

Where parents of a summer-born child want their child to start school at the age of five, as the law enables them to, their child will start school at the point when other children in their age group are moving up from the reception class to year 1. Like my hon. Friend, many parents have concerns, which I share, that starting formal schooling in year 1 and missing the essential teaching that takes place in the reception class may not be right for their child. Where parents would like their child to start school in the reception class at the age of five, they must currently make a request for them to be admitted out of their normal year group. The admissions code requires the admission authority to make decisions on such requests based on the circumstances of the case.

We have already made improvements to support summer-born children. In December 2014, the Government strengthened the code to make it clear that all decisions must be made in the child’s best interests. In making that decision, the admission authority is required to take into account the views of the headteacher of the school concerned, as they are best placed to advise on which age group at their school the child is best suited to. The code also makes it clear that admission authorities must take into account the wishes of parents, alongside other information relating to the child’s development—any relevant medical history and, in the case of premature children, whether they would have fallen into the lower age group if born at the expected time.

The Government amended the code and revised the non-statutory guidance on the admission of summer-born children to ensure transparency for parents and the best outcomes for children. The new code and guidance provide more information for both admission authorities and parents on how the process should work, emphasising that decisions should be made in the best interests of the child.

Unfortunately, in spite of that change to the code, parents and admission authorities still occasionally fail to agree on what is in the best interest of the child. I have been concerned for some time about the number of cases in which it appears that children are still being admitted against the wishes of their parents. As a consequence, these pupils are missing out on the essential early teaching of reading and arithmetic that takes place in the reception class. There are also concerns that some children who are admitted outside their normal year group are later expected to miss a year and move up, against their parents’ wishes, to join the other children of the same age range, as my hon. Friend pointed out.

Another issue, which my hon. Friend raised this time last year, is the admission of children who were born prematurely in the summer term. I agree that the potential problems that may be experienced by some summer-born children would probably be more likely for a premature child, born in the summer, whose expected date of birth was September or later. As my hon. Friend is aware, last September we announced our intention of making a further amendment to the admissions code to ensure that summer-born children could be admitted to reception at the age of five, if that was what their parents wished, and to ensure that those children were able to remain with that cohort as they progressed through school.

We made this announcement last year so that schools and local authorities were aware of the policy direction when making decisions on the cases before them. It is very welcome that some local authorities have now changed their policies on deferring entry to school and have become more flexible in agreeing to parental requests, in line with the policy intention explicitly set out in my open letter of 8 September last year to parents and local authorities. Nevertheless, as my hon. Friend pointed out, the admission of summer-born children continues to be a problem in some parts of the country. We need to do more to help parents, particularly those with genuine concerns about their child’s readiness for school.

Since our announcement last year, I know many parents throughout the country have been waiting for the change to come into force. I understand that it is frustrating, but it is important that we take the time to consider carefully how best to implement the change, and how the new arrangements will be put in place. We will support summer children in the best way we can, but it is important that we also consider the wider impact of any policy changes. It would clearly not be right for every summer-born child to delay starting school until they are five, as many will be ready to take on the challenges of formal schooling earlier. In developing this policy, we want to make sure that parents have the information that they need to make informed decisions about their child’s education. We also need to ensure that parents do not use the flexibilities as a mechanism by which to gain an unfair advantage in the admissions system by applying for a place in the reception class of their preferred school for when their child is four, and again for when their child is five. Furthermore, while we want to provide admissions flexibility where it is most needed, we also want to ensure that we do not create unintended consequences for the early years sector.

We have been considering all these issues carefully as we develop the policy. In particular, we have carried out work on the likely cost of full implementation. First indications show that the costs are high. These are, however, based on a limited amount of information on why parents might choose to defer their summer-born child’s admission to school. This is why we are starting to collect more information and data before making a decision on how to roll out any changes. I know my hon. Friend has a particular concern about the problems faced by some premature children and their readiness.
for school. I hope I can provide some reassurance that we will also be considering how best to support those children in any future changes.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this important issue today. I hope he is reassured to know that we have been driving this policy forward and ensuring the detailed work is being carried out on the arrangements we might put in place to support parents of summer-born children.

**Stephen Hammond:** Much of what the Minister has said is very helpful in adding detail. I am particularly interested in the cost analysis. My understanding is that headteachers think that while there would be a cost for movement between years, the overall cost would not be particularly excessive. I shall look at the analysis with interest. He says he is driving the policy forward. Can he give some indication of when he expects to either have the consultation or change the code?

**Mr Gibb:** We want to make sure that we have done all the research necessary to determine the extent to which parents will take advantage of new flexibilities. Some local authorities have looked seriously at the letter I sent them and are being very flexible in their approach to the parents of summer-born children. We will look to see what comes out of that experience in determining the likely take-up of those flexibilities by parents of summer-born children, which will then drive the analysis of the costs. The costs may well be neutral to a school, but may not necessarily be neutral to the system as a whole, if children stay in early years provision for longer than they would otherwise have done and therefore spend an extra year in the education system.

We are carefully considering the issues and collecting data on them, which will drive how we determine this policy. I hope that my hon. Friend is reassured that we are driving policy forward and ensuring that the detailed work is being carried out on the arrangements that we might put in place to support parents of summer-born children and to ensure that they do not feel pressured to send their children to school before they are ready.

*Question put and agreed to.*

10.15 pm

*House adjourned.*
In this question. Inactivity costs England an estimated £7.4 billion a year, and regular physical activity reduces the risk of developing many health conditions by between 20% and 40%. People who exercise regularly can reduce their risk of developing certain kinds of cancer. We are particularly pleased that, in addition to the GP physical activity clinical champion programme, Public Health England has secured funding from Sport England to pilot an education cascade model involving midwives, physiotherapists and mental health nurses and, with the support of the Burdett Trust for Nursing, will soon be launching a pilot involving 21 clinical nurse champion programmes to embed this knowledge in practising nurses. It will, however, be up to local areas to ensure that they make the best of these programmes by targeting them at their local area.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood): The national Institute for Health and Care Excellence recommends that exercise referral schemes should be provided for people at increased risk of ill health, and it is right that such schemes are developed on a local basis to meet the needs of the population. Our NHS five year forward vision strategy prioritises prevention, and the GP physical activity clinical champion programme has taught more than 4,500 healthcare professionals to provide advice on physical activity in routine clinical consultations.

Nicola Blackwood: The hon. Gentleman raises an important issue relating to drug and alcohol misuse. We have prioritised this question as one of the local statutory requirements. We have given £16 billion to local health authorities for public health delivery, and we will expect them to prioritise this issue.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): Lack of physical activity contributes to obesity. With today’s Health questions falling on World Obesity Day, as I am sure the Minister is aware, it is vital that we recommit our efforts to reversing rising obesity levels in the UK. An opportune moment would have been the childhood obesity strategy—sorry, the plan—that was published over the summer, but sadly it did not go far enough. Therefore, will the Minister commit today to ensuring that the plan is fully realised as a preventive strategy to change behaviours and help to make the next generation healthier than the last?

Nicola Blackwood: I congratulate the hon. Lady on her appointment. I am particularly pleased to see her in her place. She has played an important role in the all-party parliamentary group on breast cancer. We are very proud of the childhood obesity plan. It is based on the best available evidence, and it will make a real difference to obesity rates in this country. The Government are also consulting on the soft drinks industry levy, and we have launched a broad sugar reduction strategy. She is absolutely right to say that we must now work hard to ensure that we deliver on that with the NHS, local authorities and other partners as we move into the delivery phase of the plan. We are proud that it is a world-leading plan.

Health and Social Care: Plymouth

Johnny Mercer: As my hon. Friend says, Plymouth has taken innovative steps to try to address some of the funding inequalities at play within the Northern, Eastern and Western Devon clinical commissioning group. However, between the calculated spend and the actual spend, there is a funding shortfall of £30 million. Will he agree to work with local MPs, stakeholders and those involved in the wider Devon sustainability and transformation plan to develop a written agreement to address these inequalities?
David Mowat: My hon. Friend refers to the time lag that can exist between target and actual funding. When I visit, I will be delighted to meet stakeholders not only to understand the allocation but also to which he refers but to congratulate the health and social care leadership on the progress they have made with their fund and on the above-average satisfaction ratings that have been achieved in Plymouth.

12. [906501] Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): When the Minister is in Devon, will he meet patients’ groups and NHS staff, who are very worried about the proposals under the Government’s Orwellian Success regime, which include the closure of scores of community hospital beds, including the only community hospital beds in Exeter at Whipton hospital? Although it may make sense to integrate, and it certainly makes sense to move money from beds and buildings to better care for people in their homes, does he accept that it is simply not deliverable against a backdrop of massive cuts in social care budgets?

David Mowat: Yes, I am happy to meet in that context. The right hon. Gentleman is right that the Success regime is about a transfer of resources from the community hospitals to care at home and domiciliary care. That is not necessarily the wrong thing to do, but it must be done right, and I am happy to meet.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): I welcome greater integration, but the Minister will be aware that there are grave concerns about the effect of cuts to social care on the NHS. More and more patients are spending greater time in more expensive settings in hospital when they could be better looked after in their own homes or in the community, but cuts to social care mean that impossible. Will the Minister set out what appraisal the Government are making of the effect and the damage to the NHS of cuts to social care?

David Mowat: My hon. Friend is right: social care funding is tight. It is also true to say that those parts of the country that do the best in this regard—there are some that do considerably better than others—have integrated social care and health most effectively. On the budget itself, there is some disparity among different local authorities. About a quarter of local authorities have increased their adult social care budget by 5% or more this year.

Alcohol Consumption Guidelines

3. Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Ind): If he will publish the full scientific evidential basis for his Department’s alcohol consumption guidelines; and what representations he has received on those guidelines. [906491]

Nicola Blackwood: For many people, drinking alcohol is part of their normal social lives, and we are perfectly clear that these guidelines are advisory. They are in place to help people make informed decisions about how they drink and decide whether they want to take fewer risks with their drinking. They are not designed to label everyone who drinks as a problem drinker or to prevent everyone who wants to drink from drinking, but I point out to the hon. Gentleman that Rochdale has more than double the number of admissions to hospital where alcohol is a factor than the best authorities in England.

Byron Davies (Gower) (Con): Following on from that answer, will the Minister reassure the House that public health guidance given to consumers of alcohol is realistic and will not undermine responsible drinking campaigns, penalise responsible drinkers or damage the vital role that pubs play in our communities?

Nicola Blackwood: As I have said, these guidelines are simply intended to be advisory. They are intended to give the best possible information and advice and to put all the evidence in one place so that people can make the best possible decisions with their drinking.

Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West) (LD): Campaigners on alcohol abuse have acknowledged the importance of the pub, which is a controlled sociable environment in which to enjoy a drink compared with the unrestricted supermarkets. Will the Minister have a word with her colleagues in the Department for Communities and Local Government who continue to preside over a system in which profitable wanted pubs are demolished and in which supermarkets are built on the site against the wishes of local communities?

Nicola Blackwood: The hon. Gentleman plays a very important role as chair of the all-party save the pub group and has been a dogged campaigner for the pub. We are very clear that social drinking is not the target of these low-risk guidelines. I am happy to meet and discuss this issue with my DCLG colleagues.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): Sadly, very few people are aware of the link between alcohol consumption and obesity and of the long-term impacts of life-limiting diseases—not just cirrhosis. To ensure that the impact of obesity is integral to the alcohol consumption guidelines, will the Minister, on World Obesity Day, put tackling both adult and childhood obesity even higher up the Department’s agenda?

Nicola Blackwood: The hon. Lady is right to raise the hidden risks of alcohol consumption, which is exactly why a widespread analysis of the evidence was conducted through this guideline exercise. She is right to say that obesity should be a top priority for the Government. We will analyse her question and look into it.
PFI Health Projects

4. Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): What estimate he has made of the value of assets funded by PFI health projects which will remain in private ownership after the contracts for those projects have concluded.

Mr Dunne: Between 1997 and 2010, 103 NHS hospital PFI schemes reached financial close, creating liabilities for the NHS of £77 billion. Three legacy PFI schemes have been signed since 2010 on stricter terms, with liabilities of £1.7 billion, and one scheme has been signed under the new PF2 model, worth £340 million. In nearly all cases, except for a few of the early schemes, ownership of the hospital reverts to the NHS at the end of the PFI contract. But even in those schemes, the NHS always has the first option on whether to end or continue with the contract.

Mr Dunne: The hon. Gentleman has a consistent track record in opposing PFI, even when the vast majority of the schemes were put under contract by the Government of which he was a member—so I will not take any lectures from him about how to deal with PFI. We will continue to use the new stricter terms as and when appropriate.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): The National Audit Office concluded that the PFI contract for the Norfolk and Norwich hospital was a bad deal for the taxpayer and for the NHS, yet last year Octagon Healthcare made a record profit as the Norfolk and Norwich’s finances sank ever further into the red. Will the Minister consider making a formal approach to Octagon Healthcare to ask it to forgo part of its profit to help confront the enormous financial black hole that the trust faces?

Mr Dunne: We have provided access for seven of the worst affected trusts with obligations under PFI to a support fund of some £1.5 billion to help them with those obligations. I am not sure whether Norfolk is one of them; I suspect that it is not. I would be happy to talk to the right hon. Gentleman about this, but rather than raising his hopes inappropriately I have to say to him that many of the schemes are too costly to divert resource to pay them off completely.

Clinical Commissioning Groups: “Five Year Forward View”

5. Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): If he will take steps to ensure that clinical commissioning groups publish their proposals for implementing the NHS “Five Year Forward View”.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): The “Five Year Forward View” will be delivered through sustainability and transformation plans which are currently being developed by clinical commissioning groups in collaboration with local authorities and providers. NHS England expects that all STPs will be published, although in some areas discussions are already taking place.

Mr Baker: I am led to understand that in Wycombe we should expect no dramatic changes and possibly no publication of a strategic plan. Does my hon. Friend agree that public confidence would be much enhanced by the clear articulation in public of a strategy for meeting the “Five Year Forward View”?

David Mowat: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I will try to give a clear answer. NHS England is determined that all 44 areas will publish their plans shortly. For those that have not already done so, publication will take place after the formal checkpoint review at the end of October. Areas are working to different timescales, but the plans will all be published by the end of November. For the avoidance of doubt, that includes the STP for Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): The NHS “Five Year Forward View” called for a radical upgrade in prevention and public health. How does the Minister square that with the Government’s subsequent cuts to public health, including £200 million in-year cuts and further cuts expected by 2020?

David Mowat: The STP process is an attempt to upgrade our public health and mental health provision and cancer outcomes. Every STP will be expected to provide an assessment of local public health priorities and the timetable for progress towards that.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): Wantage community hospital in my constituency has recently closed because of the threat of Legionario’s disease, and it will not reopen until we have finally concluded consultation on the sustainability and transformation plan—if it reopens at all. This consultation has been delayed, and that naturally worries my constituents. Will the Minister join me in urging Oxfordshire to get on with consulting on this very important plan, so that we can have a reasonable discussion?

David Mowat: I will join my right hon. Friend in doing that. I am not familiar with the specifics of the Wantage case, but it does not sound right that it is an ongoing thing that is not fixed quickly.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): May I congratulate the Minister on his appointment to the Front Bench, as well as the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Nicola Blackwood), on hers? I am sure that they will do a terrific job in their posts.

As a type 2 diabetic, I am very concerned about the fact that local clinical commissioning groups are just not providing information on preventive work against diabetes. Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that diabetes will be referred to once these plans have been published?

David Mowat: I will confirm that. There is a national diabetes plan, as the right hon. Gentleman will be aware. Diabetes is one of a number of long-term conditions in which these plans are charged to deliver improvements,
and it would not be acceptable for a plan to be signed off or completed unless progress on diabetes had been made.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): When the Minister looks at new treatment options in the forward view, will he consider the example of Velindre NHS Trust in south-east Wales, which treats 1.5 million cancer patients every year and is now using reflexology, reiki healing, aromatherapy, and breathing and relaxation techniques to alleviate anxiety, pain, side effects and symptoms? If that was more widely spread over the health service in England, cost savings and patient satisfaction would increase.

David Mowat: The STP process is locally led, not led from the centre, but I would expect clinical judgments of the type mentioned to be made if they could be confirmed on the basis of scientific and trial-based evidence.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): Central to the aim of the five year forward plan for the NHS is a sustainable health service in which all patients receive the right care at the right time in the right place. With that in mind, can the Minister tell me what action he is taking to address the problem of delayed hospital discharges, which have risen by 20% so far this year? That amounts to an additional 926 people every day condemned to stay in hospital longer than is medically necessary.

David Mowat: First, may I welcome the hon. Lady to her post and wish her luck in the new job? There has been an increase in delayed discharges in England over the past year. Only a part of that increase is due to difficulties in the integration between social care and the NHS—a large part of it comes from within the NHS itself—but it is not uniform across local authorities. Indeed, many local authorities are improving in this regard. What is very clear is that those making the most progress the most quickly are those that have gone furthest in integrating social care and healthcare.

Lyme Disease

6. Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): What the timetable is for the review of the diagnosis, treatment and transmission of Lyme disease announced on 10 May 2016.

Michelle Donelan: Although I am delighted that the Government are looking into this serious and important disease, as the reviews progress thousands of people contract Lyme disease each year, particularly in areas such as Wiltshire, and they can receive inadequate treatment, so will the Minister look into speeding up these reviews?

David Mowat: It is fair challenge that this work is high priority, and we need to go as fast as possible, but we are working with research teams. The work will be trial-based and needs to be as definitive as possible.

In the meantime, early diagnosis is the key way to make progress. Public Health England continues to work with GPs and the public on it.

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): My mother recently died of motor neurone disease. In some areas of my constituency, there are 13 sufferers per 10,000 people, whereas the UK average is two per 100,000. Will the Minister please agree to meet me and representatives of the Motor Neurone Disease Association to discuss how the UK Government could lend their weight to combating this awful and debilitating disease?

David Mowat: Yes, I would be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss that subject.

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the Minister for his response on that matter.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Bearing in mind that cases of Lyme disease have quadrupled in the past 12 years, and that some of those cases have been in my constituency of Strangford in Northern Ireland, what has been done with the devolved Assemblies in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to ensure that a UK-wide strategy is put in place to address this trend and to provide effective diagnosis and treatment?

David Mowat: The principal thing that we need to do with Lyme disease is to make progress on diagnosis, treatment and transmission through a definitive approach. When the results of the study that I mentioned are published, of course they will be available across all parts of the United Kingdom.

NHS Procurement

7. Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to improve NHS procurement.

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): I agree with my hon. Friend that this is an important area. In his report earlier this year, Lord Carter identified potential annual savings of £700 million from reducing the variation in procurement performance between providers. We have announced a first tranche of 12 standardised products for all NHS providers to use; this will boost procurement volumes and bring about economies of scale, securing lower prices. These initial products, including commodity items such as gloves and needles, cover £100 million of trust spending. We expect this to result in savings of up to 25%.

Andrew Bridgen: Innovative private sector suppliers have successfully partnered with the NHS since its inception, and it is quite right to say that for that relationship to be sustainable, those suppliers must make a profit. However, does the Minister agree that rogue companies that exploit the NHS’s lack of commercial expertise could be named and shamed, because they are making a lot of money at taxpayers’ expense?

Mr Dunne: We believe that the right approach to securing procurement savings is to take advantage of the immense amount of data available across the NHS.
That is why we have set up the purchasing price index benchmarking tool. Data on more than £8 billion of expenditure, covering over 30 million separate procurement transactions, has been collated and will be analysed. We will use that information judiciously to save the taxpayer money. We think that that is the right way to start, rather than naming and shaming.

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): I urge the Minister, when thinking about national procurement and national commissioning, to look at the national strategies that can underpin them—for example, at why we need to renew the national stroke strategy. Some 100,000 people a year suffer a stroke, and nearly 1 million people in this country have had a stroke. They care very much about rehabilitation and other services.

Mr Speaker: The Minister’s challenge is to relate that very important matter to the equally important issue that happens to be the subject of the question: procurement.

Mr Dunne: I am grateful to you, Mr Speaker, for drawing the hon. Gentleman’s attention to the fact that the topic is procurement. The hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the fact that we have looked at an acute heart treatment strategy. We are creating centres of excellence across the country to ensure that if people suffer from an acute heart incident or a stroke, they are treated by the specialists who will give them the best prospects for recovery.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): The problem is that many trusts are still in a financial mess and have a deficit. If hospitals and the wider health service are to solve that, they need more funding, and councils, too, need funding for care. What is the Secretary of State doing to fight for more funding for his Department to ensure that we deal with those problems properly?

Mr Hunt: The hon. Gentleman will have noticed that in last year’s spending review the NHS got the biggest funding increase of any Government Department. We have committed to the NHS’s own plan, which asks for £10 billion more a year during the course of this Parliament in real terms. However, I do not disagree that there are still very real financial pressures in the NHS and particularly in the social care system. The trusts that are delivering the highest standards of care are those with the lowest deficits. Delivering unsafe care is one of the most expensive things people can do, which is why this is an important agenda.

Mr Hunt: The staff at Bolton have done a fantastic job. I absolutely congratulate them, and I thank my hon. Friend for his work in supporting them as well.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Secretary of State will know that in my own area of Calderdale and Huddersfield there is a dreadful situation for the trust that has been caused by the behaviour of the clinical commissioning group and the way in which it procures. He has received a large petition from thousands of people in the Huddersfield area about the closure of the A&E. Will he look at that seriously and intervene, because the competence of local CCGs is not up to the mark?

Mr Hunt: I am well aware of that issue and have received a number of representations from hon. Members on both sides of the House. There is a mechanism by which these issues end up on my desk—they have to be referred by a local council’s overview and scrutiny committee and then I get an independent recommendation—but I will look at this carefully if that process is followed.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): To cope with rapid population increases in my constituency, Basingstoke has advanced plans to build a critical treatment hospital and cancer centre, with the support of more than three quarters of the population. Does my right hon. Friend expect sustainability and transformation plans to provide clear, timely direction on plans for this new model of care in the community?

Mr Hunt: I can absolutely reassure my right hon. Friend on that. One of the main purposes of STPs is to make sure that we deliver our cancer plan, which will introduce a maximum four-week wait between GP referral and ultimate diagnosis. If we get it right, that might result in around 30,000 lives a year being saved, so this is a big priority for every STP.
NHS Staff Recruitment and Retention

9. Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): What steps he plans to take to address shortfalls in staff recruitment and retention in the NHS. [906497]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): I join the Secretary of State in welcoming the dedication and commitment of everyone who works in the NHS. We are taking active steps to encourage more people to become doctors, nurses and support staff. Only last week, my right hon. Friend announced a commitment to recruit an additional 25% of doctors to train in the NHS, which is 1,500 more doctors on top of the 6,000 currently trained every year.

Imran Hussain: Net temporary and agency staff expenditure has risen by 40% since 2013. It accounted for 8% of total staff expenditure in 2015-16, which equates to £4.13 billion. Does the Minister agree that rising agency costs point to a recruitment crisis, and will he make a statement to the House outlining his plans to address that crisis?

Mr Dunne: We recognise, absolutely, that bills for agency staff have become unsustainable, which is why we have taken deliberate action, including by introducing price caps on hourly rates last November, which has had a significant impact on reducing agency costs. In the year to date, agency costs are some £550 million less than they were last year.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I welcome last week’s announcement about the increase in the number of medical school places. What plans does the Department have to ensure that there are sufficient clinical training places for those medical students?

Mr Dunne: I can reassure my hon. Friend that there is considerable excess demand from UK-based students to train to become a clinician in this country—only half of those who apply to train in medical school are accepted at present—so we are confident that there will be plenty of take-up for those extra places. With regard to clinical placements, we are in discussions with universities, colleges and teaching hospitals to ensure that there are adequate numbers of places.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I welcome the 25% expansion in medical student places, but I reject tying that to the elimination of 25% of overseas doctors who currently work in our NHS. With 10% of posts unfilled and ever-rising patient demand, the Secretary of State must know that we will always need international graduates in the future. Does he not recognise that he is creating unrealistic expectations and conflict with this idea of a British-only medical service?

Mr Dunne: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving the opportunity to set the record straight and stop this scaremongering, which is undoubtedly unsettling many of the very valuable doctors, nurses and other foreign nationals who are currently providing vital services to the NHS. Last week’s announcement was about adding more doctors to be trained who are UK-based. We are not changing any of the present arrangements for international students being trained here, or doctors and nurses working here.

Dr Whitford: The Government might not be changing their position right now, but with one in 10 posts currently unfilled, and given the rhetoric used last week, how does the Minister expect us even to retain foreign doctors, let alone attract them to fill those posts?

Mr Dunne: There was no rhetoric used. In making that announcement, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister used no rhetoric whatsoever regarding the very valuable contribution of foreign clinicians to our health service, and that remains the case.

Nick Boles (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): Staff shortages this summer led United Lincolnshire Hospitals NHS Trust to introduce a temporary closure of Grantham A&E, causing huge concern to my constituents. Will the Secretary of State agree to meet me and Jody Clark, the founder of a local campaign group, to discuss how we can resolve this unacceptable situation?

Mr Dunne: I am well aware, from representations made by my hon. Friend and other neighbouring MPs, of the concerns that that has caused locally. The Secretary of State has already indicated to me that he does intend to meet my hon. Friend and campaigners in due course.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab): The Minister says that no rhetoric or scaremongering was used last week. Can he explain to the House what the Prime Minister meant when she said: “there will be staff here from overseas in the interim period until the further numbers of British doctors are trained and come on board in terms of being able to work in our hospitals”? What did that mean? What should we expect next—ambulances plastered with “Go home” slogans?

Mr Dunne: That is exactly the kind of ill-judged remark I have been talking about, and I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman has used it in his first appearance in his new post. By the way, I congratulate him on that new post, but I very much hope that he will use more measured language in the future, rather than spreading that kind of inappropriate rumour. The interim period referred to is the period during which doctors will be trained. We will not get new doctors coming in under the increased allocation until 2023, and during that time we will clearly need to use all measures to ensure that we fill the spaces that I acknowledge we have across several of our hospitals.

Jonathan Ashworth: I appreciate the Minister’s warm welcome, and I can tell him that I am very much looking forward to shadowing the Secretary of State, but his comments on ill-judged remarks should be directed at the Prime Minister, not me. We have seen 8,000 fewer nurses, student nurse bursaries are set to be cut, there is a reliance on agency staff and a failure to train enough doctors, and now, after six years in office, the Government are talking about self-sufficiency. Given the concerns that these plans do not go far enough, will the Minister tell us what steps he will take to ensure that...
no staff from the EU lose their jobs, and will the NHS still be able to recruit from the EU if necessary post Brexit?

**Mr Dunne:** Health Ministers have been very clear about reassuring all the 53,000 EU citizens working in our NHS that their roles are secure. Regarding clinicians, I remind the hon. Gentleman that, although we have some vacancy rates, which are acknowledged, we now have 7,800 more consultants employed in the NHS than in May 2010, 8,500 more doctors than in May 2010, and over 10,500 more nurses working on our wards. We have gone through a very consistent policy of recruiting more people to work in the NHS under this Government.

**Cancer Diagnosis**

10. **Mr John Baron** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to model the potential cost savings to the NHS budget of earlier diagnosis of cancers.

**David Mowat:** We are training 3,250 extra GPs every year, and we have a target of 5,000 additional doctors working in general practice by 2020. However, as well as new GPs, we must do much better with retention. That means keeping the GP population that we have, and there are a number of steps that the Government are taking to do that. On the specific point about Sunderland, there is a bursary scheme that is aimed at attracting GPs to areas where they may not necessarily have wished to work previously.

**NHS Efficiency Savings**

11. **Sir Simon Burns** (Chelmsford) (Con): What estimate his Department has made of the amount accrued to the public purse from efficiency savings in the NHS since May 2010.

**The Minister of State, Department of Health** (Mr Philip Dunne): In 2010 a target was set by NHS leaders to make £20 billion of efficiency savings by 2015 in order to make more funds available for treating patients and to allow the NHS to respond to changing demand and new technology. Under my right hon. Friend's inspirational leadership as a Health Minister, the NHS broadly delivered on this original challenge, reporting savings of £19.4 billion over this period. All these savings have been reinvested into front-line NHS services.

**Sir Simon Burns:** As Members would imagine, I warmly welcome that answer from the Minister. Would he confirm that those savings were achieved through greater efficiency and effectiveness in the delivery of care and by cutting waste in the NHS that occurred between 2002 and 2007? Can he confirm that the benefit of that achievement to the NHS is that not a single penny of those savings goes to the Treasury, but is reinvested in the NHS and front-line services?

**Mr Dunne:** My right hon. Friend managed to include several questions in his impressive supplementary. I can confirm that much of the waste that took place in the years he cited—2002 to 2007—related to projects of the previous Labour Government that they themselves then cancelled, such as the IT project. I can also confirm that savings generated in the NHS are kept in the NHS. Lord Carter, whose report I referred to earlier, has identified £5 billion of efficiency savings, which we hope to deliver during this Parliament.

**Justin Madders** (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): There is a distinction to be drawn between realistic efficiency targets and systematic underfunding. Only last month, Simon Stevens told the Public Accounts Committee that for three of the next five years “we did not get what we originally asked for”. Chris Hopson, chief executive of NHS Providers, also said last month that “we’ve got a huge gap coming through in the one-year survival figures. On my hon. Friend’s specific point about further study, Public Health England and Macmillan have commissioned recent studies on modelling, one part of which will be on the cost impact of earlier diagnosis, and we look forward to seeing the results of those studies.

**Bridget Phillipson** (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): GPs play a central role in the early diagnosis of cancer. In the 1990s, Sunderland was one of the most under-resourced areas in England in terms of the GP workforce, and we now face a similar and growing problem, even though action was taken then. Will the Minister set out how he intends to make sure not only that we train more family doctors, but that they are encouraged to work in areas where there is an acute shortage?
Mr Dunne: The hon. Gentleman stood on a manifesto 18 months ago in which his party was not prepared to commit the funding that our party was prepared to commit. Labour committed £5.5 billion to the NHS; we committed £8 billion, and we have delivered £10 billion.

Male Suicide

13. Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to reduce the number of men who take their own life.

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): Tragically, suicide is now the biggest single cause of death in men under 50. There are 13 suicides every day, of which three quarters are men. I am currently reviewing our suicide strategy to make sure we leave no stone unturned in trying to reduce the totally unacceptably level of these tragedies.

Colleen Fletcher: Yesterday marked the launch of the mental health awareness and suicide prevention campaign called “It takes balls to talk” across Coventry and Warwickshire. The campaign is a public information programme targeted at male-dominated sporting venues, which aims to direct men to help and support when they need it to promote positive mental health and reduce the incidence of male suicide. With suicide being the single most common cause of death in men under 45, the campaign is a public information programme targeted at male-dominated sporting venues, which aims to direct men to help and support when they need it to promote positive mental health and reduce the incidence of male suicide. Will the Secretary of State take the opportunity to welcome and support this important new campaign?

Mr Hunt: I am happy to do just that. I would like to thank the hon. Lady for raising the number of men who take their own life. We are making progress in reducing suicide rates, but we can do an awful lot better. The thing that troubles me most is that nearly three quarters of people who kill themselves have had no contact with specialist NHS mental health services in the previous year, even though in many cases we actually know who they are because, sadly, most of them have tried before. I am very happy to commend the “It takes balls to talk” campaign. She may want to put the campaign in touch with the national sport mental health charter, which is another scheme designed to use sport to try to boost the psychological wellbeing of men.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): A recent survey showed that one in four members of the emergency services experienced mental health problems, and that a number of them experienced suicidal thoughts. What is the Secretary of State doing to protect our vital paramedics and other ambulance staff, and to ensure that they get the support they need in dealing with absolutely appalling situations?

Mr Hunt: Again, I thank the hon. Lady for raising that. She will be pleased to know that the NHS has introduced a scheme, backed with funding, to encourage NHS trusts to look after the mental wellbeing of their own staff. I particularly want to pay tribute to the courage of people who work in the air ambulance service, because they see—day in, day out—some of the most difficult and distressing cases. They have to cope with the pressure of that when they take it home every day, and we all salute them.

Elderly Patients (Care Support)

14. Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): What clothing and other support the NHS provides to elderly people discharged from hospital into care homes for the first time.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): Every patient discharged from hospital into a care home should have a care plan or discharge assessment. This should include a clear assessment of their needs, covering transport, carers, GP notification, medication and, where necessary, clothing requirements.

Oliver Dowden: I have been approached by a number of constituents concerned about cases of elderly and vulnerable people who have been discharged from hospital straight into care homes, often without any basic personal effects or clothing because their family cannot or are not willing to supply them. Does the Minister recognise this, and what can the Government do to tackle it?

David Mowat: As I said earlier, there is a national process in the form of the care plan. Where the family is not able to or will not provide support, typically the voluntary sector is asked to do so. If that does not work, local authorities can increase the personal expenses allowance to provide clothing. I am interested to hear about the cases that my hon. Friend mentions in his constituency, and I am very happy to talk to him to understand better why the process has failed there.

Mr Speaker: And have a cup of tea with the fella.

Topical Questions

T1. [906469] Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt): Last week, I announced plans to make the NHS self-sufficient in the supply of newly qualified doctors by the end of the next Parliament. We recognise the brilliant work that is done by the many outstanding overseas doctors who work in the NHS and have made it clear that, whether or not they are from the EU, we wish that work to continue post-Brexit. However, as the fifth largest economy in the world, Britain should be training all the doctors it needs. While there will always be beneficial exchanges of doctors and researchers between countries, we have a global obligation to train enough doctors for our own needs, otherwise the inevitable consequence will be to denude poorer countries of doctors whose skills are desperately needed.

Luke Hall: Thornbury health centre is crying out for redevelopment to cater for the growing local population. Will my right hon. Friend meet me, representatives of the health centre and NHS Property Services to see how we can take a co-ordinated approach that will move the health centre forward?

Mr Hunt: I can do better than that, because I have said that I am prepared to go to the health centre. I remember a very good visit to Thornbury community hospital during the general election campaign. I understand
what those at the health centre are trying to do and they are absolutely right to be thinking about how they can improve out-of-hospital services.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State look into the creation of a sideways move for a chief executive of a trust that was criticised for failing to investigate patient deaths? Six weeks after the special recruitment exercise by Southern Health, Katrina Percy has resigned from her advisory role, with a substantial 12-month salary payoff that has been signed off by the Department of Health and the Treasury. The campaign group, Justice for LB, has called that “utterly disgraceful” and I agree. Will the Secretary of State investigate?

Mr Hunt: I agree with the hon. Lady that the way this case was handled was by no means satisfactory. The truth is that it took some time to establish precisely what had gone wrong at Southern Health. As this House knows, because we made a statement at the time—I think it was an urgent question, actually—there was a failure to investigate unexplained deaths. I do not think the NHS handled the matter as well as it should, but we now have much more transparency and we do not have a situation where people go on and get other jobs in the NHS, which happened so often in the past.

T4. [906472] Dr Tania Mathias (Twickenham) (Con): What will the Government do to scrutinise and assist the London ambulance service, which has had an appalling and consistently poor record on call-out times for category A emergencies?

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): My hon. Friend is right to highlight the fact that the London ambulance service is in special measures. I visited it this summer and am pleased to confirm that some £63 million of additional funding has been provided to the ambulance service since April 2015. The service is starting to make significant inroads in increasing the number of paramedics who are available on call, with some 250 more being added over the last couple of years.

T2. [906470] Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Last October, the then Health Minister, the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), confirmed that my constituency fell far below the national average in terms of NHS dental provision. In fact, it is one of the worst in the country. Unfortunately, nothing has changed since then. Does the Secretary of State believe it is acceptable that my constituents, including many children, are unable to get an NHS dentist?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): This is a very difficult area, but decisions on priority are clinically driven and must continue to be based on peer-reviewed data. The most recent review determined that less than one third of second transplants would result in survival after five years; that is why they were not funded. There will, however, be a further review next April, and to the extent that the data have changed there will be a new evaluation at that time.

T5. [906473] Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): Deer Park medical centre in Witney faces closure, and patients will be dispersed a long way into other practices in an area where one in four already waits more than a week to see their GP. Duncan Enright, who is Labour’s candidate in the Witney by-election, is campaigning to save the centre. Will the Secretary of State reward his campaign by saving it today?

Mr Jeremy Hunt: The Conservative candidate in the Witney by-election will be saying very clearly that because of the extra funding from this Government we are aiming to have 5,000 more doctors working in general practice by the end of this Parliament, something that would not have been possible with the increase of less than half that amount promised by the Labour party.

T6. [906474] Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): The Government have provided a welcome increase in funding for mental health support, yet it does not appear to be reaching my constituency effectively, particularly for children. Now there are concerns that the Millbrook unit at nearby Macclesfield hospital might close. Will the Secretary of State look into those concerns?

Mr Jeremy Hunt: I am very happy to do that. My hon. Friend is right to highlight the fact that the provision of mental health services to children is one of the biggest weak spots in NHS provision today. It is an area that we are putting a big focus on. I would be happy to talk to her about the situation in her constituency.

T3. [906471] Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): I know that this is a devolved matter, but I look forward to the Union working together on it. In Northern Ireland, the health service is in crisis. To give cancer as an example, 6.7% of those with breast cancer are called in to be checked within 14 days—not 100%—and yet we have 392,000 people on the waiting list. Will the Secretary of State or his officials meet us to find a better way forward, so that we can all work together?

David Mowat: I have made it clear that we should all be working together to defeat cancer. We know that the best way of doing so is early diagnosis. We have made a lot of progress on that in England over the past few years but have a lot further to go. We are of course willing to talk to the devolved Administration about what they can learn from us—and perhaps vice versa.

T7. [906475] Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): Will the Secretary of State look again at the decision not to fund second stem cell transplants for adults and children with blood cancers, given the significant clinical evidence of their benefit for those who relapse? He should not just take my word for it but should take it from the Anthony Nolan Trust and the 36 specialists who have written to him asking him to review the decision.

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Friend give that his Department is continuing to review the findings of the Bliss report, and when can we expect to hear more?

Mr Dunne: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising baby loss awareness week. I am sure that, along with other hon. Members, she will be participating in the Backbench Business debate on that later this week. In February the independent maternity review, Better Births, made a number of recommendations, including on neonatal critical care. We are studying those recommendations and are due to report initial findings from our work in December.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I listened very closely to the Secretary of State’s comments earlier on mental health. On 9 December he stood at that Dispatch Box and said that “CCGs are committed to increasing the proportion of their funding that goes into mental health.”—[Official Report, 9 December 2015; Vol. 603, c. 1012.]

However, my research shows that 57% of clinical commissioning groups are reducing the proportion they spend on mental health—yet another broken promise. When will we have real equality from this Government for mental health?

Mr Jeremy Hunt: I will tell the hon. Lady what this Government have done. We have legislated for parity of esteem for mental health. We are treating 1,400 more people every single day for mental health conditions compared with six years ago. We have a new plan that will see 1 million more people treated every year by 2020, including a transformation of child and adolescent mental health services. That is possible because we are putting into the NHS extra money that her party refused to commit to.

T9. [906478] Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Government have a moral obligation to end the raid on poorer countries for their skilled doctors and nurses and to make our NHS recruitment more self-sufficient?

Mr Hunt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I find it extraordinary that the Labour party said that our plan to train more doctors was “nonsense”. We currently have 800 doctors in the NHS from Sri Lanka, 600 from Nigeria, 400 from Sudan and 200 from Myanmar. They are doing a brilliant job and I want them to continue doing that job, but we have to ask ourselves whether it is ethical for us to continue to recruit doctors from much poorer countries that really need their skills.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): I was alarmed to read at the weekend that NHS chiefs are warning that hospitals in England are on the brink of collapse. Is it the Government’s intention to cut the public supply of healthcare in order to create demand for a private healthcare system, or will they give the NHS the additional funds it needs?

Mr Hunt: Let me remind the hon. Lady that the party that introduced the most outsourcing to the private sector was her Labour Government under the previous Health Secretary, Alan Milburn. Our view is that we should be completely neutral as to whether local doctors decide to commission their care from the public sector or private sector. We want the best care for patients.

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): I welcomed last week’s NHS Improvement report which states that there are now sufficient staff for Chorley and South Ribble hospital’s A&E department to reopen, but I am dismayed that the trust is delaying the reopening until January next year. Will the Minister reassure me that he will work with me and other stakeholders to oblige the trust to open as soon as possible?

Mr Dunne: My hon. Friend has been a doughty champion of Chorley, in combination with another Member of the House and local campaigners, who visited the Houses of Parliament yesterday to meet local MPs. While welcoming the reopening of the A&E from January, I am happy to continue to work with my hon. Friend to see whether it can be brought forward.

Mr Speaker: The other doughty champion of the hospital is of course the right hon. Member for Chorley (Mr Hoyle), who regularly deputises for me in this Chair. I am sure the House will want to acknowledge that important fact.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): I heard the Minister’s response earlier. He was of course right that sustainability and transformation plans are led locally, but he failed to acknowledge that the Government have given a mandate to make cuts attached to STPs. Without consultation, my local hospital has been downgraded. What on earth will the Secretary of State say to my constituents who may lose loved ones because they have had to travel miles further to another hospital?

David Mowat: If I may, I will give a quote:

“To reshape services over the next 10 years, the NHS will need the freedom to collaborate, integrate and merge across organisational divides.”

That comes from the 2015 Labour manifesto. The STP process is designed to bring about better care and health, and better productivity. We should be critical friends of the process because we all want a better national health service.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): Local health commissioners have concluded that Telford’s brand new women and children’s centre, which serves some of the most deprived populations in the country, should be closed and moved to a more affluent area where health is better than the national average. The commissioning process has lost the confidence of local people. Will the Secretary of State intervene and ensure that local health commissioners fulfil their legal duty to reduce health inequalities?

Mr Jeremy Hunt: I thank my hon. Friend for standing up for her constituents—it is absolutely right that she should do so. She would agree that that has to be a local matter led by commissioners locally, but she can be reassured that we are always watching what is happening to ensure that people follow due process, and that the results of any changes proposed benefit patients as intended. I will therefore watch very carefully what is happening in Telford and in Shropshire more broadly.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): About half a dozen times in the last hour, the Secretary of State has bragged about the extra money he is putting in to the national health service, so why is Bolsover hospital, like
Mr Hunt: The extra money we are putting in to the NHS is going to better cancer care, better mental health care and better GP provision—it is going to all the things that Members on both sides of the House know matter. It will also mean that we can support our hospitals better. With our ageing population, we will continue to have great demand for hospital care, but the best way to relieve pressure on those hospitals is to invest in better out-of-hospital care, which has not been done for many years.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Kettering general hospital is treating a record number of patients with increasingly world-class treatments, yet despite being located in an area of rapid population growth, due to an historic anomaly, the funding for the local clinical commissioning groups is among the worst in the country in relative terms. What can Her Majesty’s Government do to correct that?

Mr Hunt: I am happy to look at that particular funding issue for my hon. Friend. I know that Kettering hospital is under a great deal of pressure. The one thing that it could do to relieve its financial pressures is to look at the number of agency and locum staff that it employs. As with many hospitals, there are big savings to be made in that respect in ways that improve rather than decrease the quality of clinical care.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): The Secretary of State will be aware that the Public Accounts Committee has questioned both the Department of Health and NHS England on the parlous state of NHS accounts this year, following the comments by the Comptroller and Auditor General. It is clear that STPs are the only plan on the table. Will the Secretary of State make clear his support to the NHS to deliver the STPs in the teeth of opposition from his own Back Benchers? If he will not, what is plan B?

Mr Hunt: I do not recognise the picture the hon. Lady paints about opposition to STPs. We need to ensure we have good plans that will deliver better care for NHS patients by bringing together and integrating the health and social care system, and improving the quality of out-of-hospital plans. While we are in a period where those plans have not been published there will obviously be a degree of uncertainty, which we will do everything we can to alleviate, but she is right to say that these plans are very important for the future of the NHS. The process has our full support.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): The Secretary of State will be aware of the concern in my constituency about the future of Paignton hospital, which prompted hundreds to turn up to a recent meeting. Does he agree with me that it is vital the clinical commissioning group, in publishing its plans, does not just publish what it will remove but the details of what it will replace them with?

Mr Dunne: Considerable efforts are going into sorting out some of the historical challenges in the provision of both acute and community care in Devon. I hosted a meeting for a number of colleagues who are concerned about this and I am happy to continue to engage with colleagues across the county.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Two years ago, Nottingham University Hospitals NHS trust privatised support services, including cleaning, handing them over to Carillion in an effort to save money. Since then there have been shortages of equipment, shortages of staff and an appalling decline in standards of cleanliness. Will the Secretary of State condemn Carillion for putting patients at risk? When will he ensure that hospital services in Nottingham are properly funded?

Mr Jeremy Hunt: The decision on whether to outsource services must be a matter for local hospitals. I know that that hospital has been struggling with its deficit. I have been to visit the hospital myself and I know it has been trying very hard to improve clinical care. If the contract is not working and the quality is not right, I would expect the hospital to change it, but it must be its decision.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I am sorry, but, rather as in the health service under any Government, demand has exceeded supply and we must move on.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: I was keeping the hon. Lady waiting for only a moment, so that there was a due sense of anticipation in the House. That sense now definitely exists.
Point of Order

12.37 pm

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. It is rather frustrating to hear Ministers and some Back Benchers continually referring to the Government having invested, or intending to invest, £10 billion into our NHS over the course of this Parliament. You may be aware, Mr Speaker, that I sit on the Health Committee. I would like to read you the following extract from a report:

“Last year’s Spending Review announced that the NHS would receive an additional £8.4 billion above inflation by 2020-21. But whilst previous spending reviews define health spending as the whole of the Department of Health’s budget, the 2015 Spending Review defines it in terms of NHS England’s budget, which excludes, for example, spending on public health.”

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady. She is nothing if not persistent and she has put that thought on the record. I say to her in all courtesy, however, that she is not the first person to do this—I probably did it myself in the very distant past—and I do not suppose she will be the last. It is a very interesting point, but it is a continuation of debate. There is no matter for the Chair here. For that reason, and that reason alone, I must ask her to desist at this stage, but I have a feeling she will find ingenious ways of returning to her point on other occasions.

Perhaps we can leave it there, because we are short of time and I want to proceed. Unless there are further points of order—I am not exactly looking for them—then we will come on to the ten-minute rule motion. I call Conor McGinn.

Unlawful Killing (Recovery of Remains)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

12.38 pm

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to establish a presumption against eligibility for parole in cases where a person, convicted of unlawfully killing another person, has not provided relevant knowledge in their possession for the purposes of facilitating the location and recovery of the remains of the victim; to create a separate offence of withholding such information; to make provision about the available sentences for such an offence; and for connected purposes.

For a parent to suffer the anguish of losing a child is beyond words, but the horror of having such a loved one murdered is surely too awful even to contemplate, so it is harder still, if even possible, to imagine the pain of being denied the chance to hold a proper funeral and lay that loved one to rest. My constituent Marie McCourt does not need to imagine it, because for 28 years she has been forced to endure what she describes as the special kind of torture of knowing she could die without ever discovering where her daughter’s body is or being able to lay her daughter to rest with the dignity she deserves.

Marie’s daughter Helen was murdered at the age of just 22 by Ian Simms in February 1988, as she travelled home from work in the village of Billinge in my constituency. In a landmark conviction, he was found guilty of murder based on overwhelming DNA evidence, even though Helen’s body was not found. For almost three decades, Marie has been tormented because he refuses to reveal what happened to her daughter’s body. Despite this brutal act of callousness and lack of remorse, he could soon be released from jail. This is not the justice that Marie and her family deserve. Killers who inflict this kind of suffering on their victims’ families should not be released on parole. That goes to the heart of the Bill I am bringing forward today.

Before I continue, I want to say something about Marie. She had Helen taken from her in the cruelest circumstances, only to be denied the sacred right to bury her daughter. Few could have found the strength to carry on, let alone mount such a formidable campaign to have the law changed so that others do not suffer in the way she has suffered. Her quiet dignity and powerful determination are an example to us all.

Our campaign for Helen’s law, led by Marie, calls on the Government to introduce a “no body, no parole” policy for murderers. The online petition has already attracted the support of over 340,000 signatures, and in February I was honoured to accompany Marie to No. 10 Downing Street to present the petition. The Government responded to the overwhelming public support for the campaign by asking the Parole Board to review the guidelines around convicted murderers. We await the outcome of that review, which is at least welcome progress, but as Marie has so eloquently and repeatedly said, this campaign is not just about her or Helen; it is about ensuring that others who find themselves in such horrific circumstances do not have such added pain visited on them.

Just yesterday, the Home Office revealed to me that since 2007 alone there have been 30 murders in England and Wales where no body has been recovered, but as it currently stands the English legal system does not require
a convicted murderer, at the end of their determined tariff, to admit guilt or reveal the location of a victim’s remains before being released. Marie believes that if parole is granted to Helen’s killer, her hopes of finding her daughter will never be realised. As I have said, she is also determined that no other family should have to live that ordeal.

My Bill seeks to acknowledge, and in some cases mitigate, the pain and distress caused to the families of missing murder victims. There are three main elements to it: first, denying parole to murderers for as long as they refuse to disclose the whereabouts of their victim’s remains; secondly, passing a full-life tariff, denying parole or release, until the murderer discloses the location and enables the recovery of their victim’s remains; and thirdly, applying the rarely used common-law offences in murder trials without a body of preventing the burial of a corpse and conspiracy to prevent the burial of a corpse, disposing of a corpse or obstructing a coroner. In essence, the proposals are simple: if a convicted killer refuses to give information to reveal the location of a victim’s body, they should not be considered eligible for parole and they should stay in prison. The proposals would effectively mean a whole-life tariff for murderers who refuse to disclose the location of their victims and enable their remains to be recovered to give families a chance to pay their last respects.

Let me be clear: the modern system of parole is widely understood to involve a prisoner earning their conditional release through good behaviour. I believe in and support the rehabilitative purpose of our penal system, but while the current tariff system for the most serious crimes reflects the consensus that the majority will at some point be able to rejoin society, one is bound to ask in what sense a murderer who is content to torment the family of their victims in such a way could ever have earned their freedom.

In recent years, Parliament and the legal profession have begun to take the rights of victims more seriously, and I believe that this Bill would be a further step towards ensuring that victims are at the heart of our criminal justice system—where they should always be.

Let me make it clear that the proposals in the Bill would not affect any individual’s fundamental right to maintain their innocence. The law changes I propose would not impinge in any way on the rights of convicted killers to retain full access and full recourse to the appeals process. It is worth noting, however, that in the case of Helen McCourt’s killer, his guilt has only been further confirmed at every single appeals stage because of enhanced DNA evidence against him.

Let me also say that my Bill will have no impact on the work of the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims’ Remains in respect of those referred to as “the disappeared”; nor would it impact on arrangements set out in relation to sentencing for offences committed during the troubles or indeed any future arrangements on addressing the legacy of the past in Northern Ireland. I want to acknowledge, however, that the pain and anguish felt by the families of the disappeared are the same as for any family who has lost a loved one in such awful circumstances.

We are not alone in this country in seeking to find a workable legal solution. In Australia, “no body, no parole” laws have already been passed at state level and are being examined at federal level. Quite simply, the introduction of Helen’s law is the only chance that the McCourts and other families like them have of securing some peace and the justice they deserve.

I want to acknowledge some of the families who are visiting Parliament today to attend this debate. Sheila Dolton and her daughter Nina are here. Their son and brother, Jonathan, was murdered in 2004. The family has continually written to his killer, begging for information about the son’s body, but has received no reply. Sam Gillingham was just 16 when her mum, Carole Packman, disappeared from the family home in Bournemouth in 1985, while Tracy Richardson’s mum, Michelle Gunshon, vanished in December 2004 while working at the NEC in Birmingham. Sadly, this Bill comes too late for Winnie Johnson who went to her grave never knowing where Moors murderers Ian Brady and Myra Hindley buried her 12-year-old son, Keith Bennett. But there is still time for Marie McCourt and other grieving mothers such as Joan Morson and Jean Taylor who also saw their children’s killers go to jail without revealing where their victims’ bodies lay. Denying a final resting place is perhaps the last heinous act by killers who have no place in a civilised society. The agony and torment caused to those who cannot lay a murdered loved one to rest is incalculable.

The families of victims quite rightly expect the law to act in their favour, instead of seeing the justice system rewarding with parole killers who decide to remain silent. For those who have had to face the loss of a loved one at the hands of a callous murderer, there is nothing we can do to make up for their loss, but if there is a way to help them receive the justice they deserve, we must take it. If there is a way to compel those who have committed the most awful crimes to assist in this task, we must do it. Most importantly of all, if there is a way to ensure that no family has to endure the suffering that Marie McCourt and so many others have, we—in this of all places—have a duty to act.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Conor McGinn, Tom Tugendhat, Mr George Howarth, Siobhain McDonagh, Tom Elliott, Vernon Coaker, Marie Rimmer, Nusrat Ghani, Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson, Carol Monaghan, Diana Johnson and Mr Alan Campbell present the Bill.

Conor McGinn accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 3 February 2017, and to be printed (Bill 73).
Aleppo and Syria

12.49 pm

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the unfolding humanitarian catastrophe in Aleppo and more widely across Syria.

Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this emergency debate on the unfolding humanitarian catastrophe in Aleppo and more widely across Syria. Although it was I who moved the motion applying for the debate under Standing Order No. 24, it has the strong support of the all-party parliamentary group for Friends of Syria, particularly my co-chairman, the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock), and my hon. Friend the Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart). I am most grateful to them for the work that they do in the all-party group.

I am particularly pleased to see that the Foreign Secretary is present. The whole House will be grateful for the importance that he attaches to the debate. He has written and spoken about Syria, and I know that it is a subject on which he feels strongly. We are very pleased that the House is to hear from him this afternoon on what I think will be his first debate as Foreign Secretary.

Yesterday, Mr Speaker, you had a choice between a Standing Order No. 24 application for a debate on Brexit and another for a debate on Syria. Everyone in the House will know that you made the right decision, and you explained your reasons, but I now submit that the effects of the crisis in Syria on our children and our grandchildren will be every bit as great as the effects of Brexit. Today’s debate will be watched by many people: civil society across much of the world will take an interest in the tone and the view that the House of Commons adopts this afternoon, and that is a very good thing.

At about 10 o’clock this morning there was a series of further air raids on civilian areas in Aleppo, and there are already reports of yet further casualties, maimings and deaths. As we look back at the Syrian crisis over recent years, we see that, at every turn, progress towards a solution has, alas, eluded us. First, at a relatively early stage, there was the plan put forward by Kofi Annan, the former United Nations Secretary-General, who stated specifically that as Assad was part of the problem he would by definition be part of the solution. Kofi Annan believed that Assad should be part of the negotiations, but that was vetoed by the Americans, and indeed—alas—by the British Government. Now, many years later, we understand how important it is that Assad should at least be present at the initial negotiations. He is not going to be beaten militarily, in my view, and it is clearly right for him to be there for the early part of the negotiations, as the Syrian opposition accept. However, more time has been lost.

Secondly, there was Obama’s failure to stand by the red lines that he had clearly asserted on the use of chemical weapons. That was a disastrous decision, and one from which we will suffer in the future.

Thirdly, there was the failure to provide safe havens. Much of civil society believed in the importance of providing refuge for the—now—more than 5 million Syrian men, women and children who are on the move in Syria, having been driven out of their homes. Those safe havens could, with political will, have been set up in both Idlib, which is in the north of Syria, and Daraa, which is near the Jordanian border in the south. We could, as many people have advocated, have set up no-bombing zones, but we have not done so. Today, 5 million people in Syria and 6 million outside are on the move, often unprotected, unfed and unhoused. That is the reality: nearly half the country’s population of 22 million are on the move, either inside Syria or beyond its borders.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a powerful case. Does he agree that, militarily, there is no reason why we could not enforce a no-fly zone when so many people are being affected? The helicopters that are dropping barrel bombs could easily be brought down by rockets based in Turkey or Lebanon, or, indeed, by our own type 45s in the Mediterranean.

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend knows far more about such military matters than I do. That is my understanding of the position: that a no-fly zone—and I will say more about this later—is perfectly feasible. It is a question of whether the international community has the political will to face down the Russians and the Syrian helicopters by setting one up.

Fourthly, there was the failure to secure unfettered access for the United Nations. It is unprecedented in recent years for those bent solely on looking after their fellow citizens to be unable to gain unfettered access to very dangerous zones. This gives me an opportunity to pay tribute to the extraordinary bravery of those who work in the humanitarian world, doing nothing other than try to assist their fellow human beings and bring them sustenance, help, medicine and support.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): What roles does the right hon. Gentleman envisage for Syria’s near neighbours and for the west, including Britain, in the protection of people in the safe havens to which he referred earlier?

Mr Mitchell: That is an extremely good point, and I shall come to it shortly.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Is not the tragedy of Syria that none of us can imagine a future Syrian Government who would have both the power to take charge and the wisdom to govern in a peaceful and unifying way?

Mr Mitchell: I shall come to that point as well, but let me say now that the whole purpose of the efforts of the International Syria Support Group—and those of other elements, under Staffan de Mistura—is to answer the question that my right hon. Friend has so eloquently posed.

The fifth failure lies in the surrounding countries, particularly Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. Although they have acted heroically in dealing with the extraordinary number of people who have fled across the borders, often under gunfire, there has been a lack of support from the international community for countries whose populations have ballooned, given that one in three of
the people in Jordan and Lebanon has fled from Syria. Britain has undoubtedly done her stuff. I am pleased to see that the Secretary of State for International Development is present; she can be extremely proud of the Department that she has inherited for the outstanding work that Britain has done in helping refugees in the surrounding countries—more, I might add, than has been done by the whole of the rest of the European Union.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): My right hon. Friend may well be aware that, in a fairly short space of time, far more Syrian than Lebanese children will be being educated in Lebanese state schools. Does that not speak volumes for the hospitality of the Lebanese?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend has made his point with great eloquence.

We are not using the opportunity—if I may put it in that way—to provide an education for the children in the camps, given that they at least constitute a captive audience. Every child in a camp in one of the surrounding countries should be receiving an education. There should be education and training, and, indeed, there should be opportunities for the countries that are receiving all the refugees to have free access to the European Union for their goods and services. That is not happening. Moreover, because some countries have failed to pay their dues to the United Nations in some of the camps, the children and adults there are receiving only half the rations that they should be receiving, and they are down to starvation rations at that.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I recently received a parliamentary answer from the Minister of State, Department for International Development, the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), on the subject of air drops. He stated:

“...the use of air drops to deliver aid is high risk and should only be considered as a last resort when all other means have failed”.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that it would seem that “all other means” have indeed failed?

Mr Mitchell: Not in respect of the camp. On the basis of my knowledge of these matters, I think that my hon. Friend the Minister of State was right to say that air drops should be used only as a last resort, but clearly they should be used if we reach that point.

The sixth and final barrier to progress has, of course, been the reception of refugees in Europe, where there has not been proper processing. Many of these people have cast themselves into the hands of the modern-day equivalent of the slave trader in the hope of reaching a more prosperous and safer shore. I think that Europe as a whole—which, admittedly, has its inward-facing problems—has failed to address this problem adequately, and to show proper solidarity with Greece and Italy as well. I might add, than has been done by the whole of the rest of the European Union.

Nadhim Zahawi (Stratford-on-Avon) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend for securing this debate. Does he agree that the Russian military has a deep history with the Syrian military, and that it is in Russia’s gift to deliver a peace process? When we visited Russia as part of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the Russian politicians kept reminding us that they wanted to be taken seriously by the whole world and that they were a serious power. In order to be taken seriously, however, they really should be following the rule of law and international law. They should not be aiding and abetting war criminals such as Assad.

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point.

The extraordinary misfortune of timing that I mentioned is being exacerbated by international attention being elsewhere. In Europe, Brexit, the issues with the euro, Greece, the German banks and the focus on migration have all meant that the focus has been on the symptoms rather than the causes of this conflict. In the United States, politicians have turned in on themselves as the election approaches, and Obama has underwritten an isolationist approach. However, there are people such as Senator Lindsey Graham and Secretary Kerry who are seized of the importance of this moment in tackling what Russia is doing. Then of course there is Russia, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Nadhim Zahawi) has alluded. It is behaving like a rogue elephant, shredding international humanitarian law and abusing its veto powers in the UN Security Council. It is using the veto to protect itself from its own war crimes.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The right hon. Gentleman is making an incredibly compelling case. The situation in Aleppo is beyond appalling. Does he agree that our own Government should follow the example of the French in supporting a referral of Russia to the International Criminal Court? Also, I completely understand the case that he is making for a no-fly zone, but does he recognize the risks involved in establishing such a zone? How would he best protect against the risk of an expansion of the mission if it were not initially successful?

Mr Mitchell: I shall come on to the hon. Lady’s second point in a moment. On her first point, I agree with her. The UN Secretary general called for such a referral only yesterday.

The attack on the convoy marked a new low, with 18 humanitarian workers killed, food and medicines destroyed and warehouses and medical facilities seriously damaged. We should be clear about what is happening in Aleppo. The Russians are not attacking military
formations. They are not engaging with militias and fighters. They are attacking hospitals and a terrified population, which is now down from 2 million to under 250,000. People are hiding in the cellars and the rubble that is Aleppo today. Last week, the M10 underground hospital was attacked by bunker-busting bombs to break through its roof and by cluster bombs aimed specifically at harming and injuring individual people. The location of that hospital was known to every combatant. There is no doubt that attacking that hospital was an international war crime.

Mr Jonathan Djanogly (Huntingdon) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making an incredibly strong case. When it comes to Russia, are we not living in some kind of parallel universe? On the one hand, we see the Russians dropping bunker bombs on hospitals. On the other, we are allowing them to come and trade in our country as though nothing was going on. Do we not need a general review of our relationship with Russia?

Mr Mitchell: The Russians are doing to the United Nations precisely what Italy and Germany did to the League of Nations in the 1930s, and they are doing to Aleppo precisely what the Nazis did to Guernica during the Spanish civil war.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): I join my right hon. Friend in supporting no-bombing zones, as well as aid drops in memory of our former colleague and my Yorkshire neighbour, Jo Cox. On the issue of no-fly zones, I served in the Royal Air Force on the no-fly zone over northern Iraq. Does he agree that one message we could send out from this House today would be that, using our E-3 Sentry AWACS reconnaissance aircraft, any war crimes perpetrated by air forces would be identified and logged, and that the perpetrators would feel the full force of the law as a result?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend is on to an extremely good point.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The right hon. Gentleman mentioned Guernica. In the 1930s, there was united condemnation of what the Nazis and their air force were doing in Spain in support of the fascist regime. Is it not time that we had a united, unambiguous, explicit, direct condemnation of what Putin is doing in support of Assad in Aleppo at this moment, not just from the Government but from the Opposition Benches unanimously?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman is on to an extremely good point. What is needed is a concerted effort by the international community uniting to make Russia feel the cost of its support of and participation in the barbaric bombardment of Aleppo.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. His comparison with the actions of the Nazi regime and the League of Nations is very powerful. Is this not a warning to the United Nations that unless it fulfils its duties and faces up to the atrocities that Russia is perpetrating, it might well go the same way as the League of Nations did?

Mr Mitchell: That is the very point I was making.

We should single Russia out as a pariah. Like any bully, the Kremlin craves relevance, and it is winning as long as no one stands up to it. Russia must be confronted for its attacks on innocent civilians, both diplomatically and using hard power including sanctions and economic measures. We must seek to build support for multilateral military action to discharge our responsibility to protect. This is not about attacking Russia. It is about defending innocent civilians. It is about basic humanitarian decency and protection from the kind of barbarism and tyranny we hoped we had consigned to the last century.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): I completely concur with the right hon. Gentleman’s words about Russia and the atrocities that it is committing against the people of Syria, but should we not also look at this in the context of Russia’s previous actions in Ukraine and Crimea? Ought we not to remember that Russia as a state is increasingly out of control? It is not playing by the rules, and we absolutely have to confront its behaviour internationally.

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Lady makes an extremely powerful point. We cannot do this alone. We must use Britain’s outstanding connections, not least through our diplomatic reach, our membership of NATO, our relationship with America and our centrality in the European firmament—Brexit notwithstanding.

Robert Flello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): I am most grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, not only for securing this debate but for allowing so many interventions. Would it not be appropriate for the Government to bring forward a debate asking this House to put forward its views on Russia’s behaviour not only in Aleppo but in previous situations? We need the Government to lead on such a debate, so that the House can send out the very clear message that we are watching what Russia is doing and will not forget what it is doing, and that, when it comes to it, we will see those responsible answering for their war crimes.

Mr Mitchell: I think the hon. Gentleman would agree that, by having this three-hour debate today, we are moving some way in that direction.

I have a number of specific questions for the Foreign Secretary to address when he answers this debate. First, he has said that the UK is taking the lead on sanctions on Russia. Will he tell the House what steps the Foreign Office has taken towards increasing bilateral or EU sanctions on Russia itself? Secondly, there are plans for a new addition to the Nord Stream gas pipeline running from Russia to western Europe—Nord Stream 2—allowing Russia to bypass transit countries and, therefore, transit costs in eastern Europe. Will the Foreign Office be working with our east European allies to block the new pipeline?

Graham Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I presume that we are talking about the gas pipeline that runs from Kurdistan through Turkey and the Black sea and bypasses Ukraine.
and the eastern provinces. The signing of that deal was agreed yesterday between Erdogan and Putin. A relationship seems to be building up between those two. Does the right hon. Gentleman have any view on that, because that movement of Turkey towards Russia is concerning?

Mr Mitchell: The Foreign Secretary has recently been in Turkey. I am sure that the House will be interested in his comments.

My third question for the Foreign Secretary is, what work has been done to catalogue and record human rights abuses—both individual and collective—in Syria? Will he update the House on the work of the Foreign Office, which was started and commissioned by the National Security Council in 2011, to collect evidence that can be used in the future to hold human rights abusers to account no matter how long it takes?

Fourthly, what steps has the Foreign Secretary taken with his colleagues in the Ministry of Defence to explore the feasibility of imposing and enforcing a no-fly zone over specific areas in Syria? Does he agree that, with the use of naval and air assets in the eastern Mediterranean, it is entirely possible both to monitor and enforce a no-fly zone with our allies? What steps will he take to make it clear to the international community that a no-fly zone is a matter of will and not of practicality?

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I have operated under a no-fly zone. It is practical and it can work, but it is quite difficult at a low level. That requires us to have seriously good surveillance over the target areas. If we have that, we can deal with it. We cannot have just a no-fly zone; we need good surveillance as well.

Mr Mitchell: I have no doubt that the Foreign Secretary will want to comment on those remarks, to which my hon. Friend brings his expert knowledge and understanding.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): As one of the four Opposition Members who did not oppose military action on that fateful day in August 2013, I fully support any measure to impose a no-fly zone. I assure the Government that, if they were to bring forward such a proposal, I will vote with them, and I guess quite a lot of my colleagues will do so as well.

Mr Mitchell: That is extremely welcome news both inside the House and outside.

I have one final point on the no-fly zone. Will my right hon. Friend make a specific point of meeting the former Prime Minister John Major to explore his experiences in imposing a no-fly zone and a safe haven in northern Iraq during the 1990s?

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way and I congratulate him on securing this debate. Given the discussion that there is over a no-fly zone, does he share my concern that Russia has moved very advanced surface-to-air missile systems into Syria when clearly Daesh or the al-Nusra front do not have a fast-jet capability. At whom might those missiles be targeted?

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend makes a good point, but those S-300 missiles do not affect the viability of imposing a no-fly zone.

My final question for the Foreign Secretary is, what steps are he and his Department taking to support and enhance the work of the International Syria Support Group? Staffan de Mistura has said that the suspension of bilateral negotiations between the two chairs, US and Russia, “should not and will not” affect the existence of the group. What steps is Britain taking to provide financial, diplomatic and political support to the International Syria Support Group? This group includes all of the five permanent members, Italy, Turkey, Japan, Iran, and the key Arab countries. It represents the UN, the EU and the Arab League. It needs to be greatly expanded. There should be an office, for example, working with and adjacent to the Geneva talks. It should carry out work on the key ingredients for a peace whenever that may come, and we should give very strong support to it.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): May I add a question to the ones that the right hon. Gentleman has posed to the Foreign Secretary? He has spoken very powerfully. Members of the House have described Russia as a bully. He has compared it with the Nazi regime of the 1930s. Is it not utterly ludicrous that, in two years’ time, the greatest sporting spectacle on earth—the World cup—will be held in Russia, but not a single country is pulling out of it? If we are really serious about sending a message to Putin that is heard on the ground, should we not be questioning whether the World cup should take place in Russia?

Mr Mitchell: The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely good point. I hope that when he is considering sanctions, both economic and otherwise, the Foreign Secretary will have a view on that.

The international community faces a choice. Are we so cowed and so poleaxed by recent history in Iraq and Afghanistan that we are incapable now of taking action? Was all the international handwringing after Rwanda, Bosnia and Srebrenica when we said “never again” just hot air? Is all the work on the responsibility to protect—RtoP—which was unanimously adopted by the United Nations Security Council and agreed by the entire international community just so many words? Let us at least be clear here among ourselves. We have a choice: we can turn away from the misery and suffering of children and humanity in Aleppo; we can once again, on our watch, appease today’s international law breaker, Russia, and continue to find eloquent excuses for inaction; or we can be seen to take a lead to explore the situation energetically and with determination with our allies in NATO, Europe, America, and the United Nations and refuse to take no for an answer. We can look at every possible way of ending this barbarism and this tyranny, which is threatening the international rules-based system, destroying international order and engulfing the Syrian people.

1.17 pm

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): May I start by welcoming the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel) to her new position? I also welcome to his post the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), whom I have not seen in this place until today. I hope that they will both find their new roles fulfilling.
I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) for securing this debate, and for the eloquent and passionate way in which he has spoken up for the people of Aleppo. He spoke up for them throughout his time as International Development Secretary. He stood on the side of the poor and oppressed throughout the world, and he has done so again today. He also understood how much the commitment to spend 0.7% of national income on helping those most in need mattered, which is something from which his successors could learn. He agrees with me that Britain’s work in international development reveals the better part of ourselves and is something about which we should be inordinately proud.

The situation for innocent civilians in Aleppo is truly a hell on earth. They are trapped, impoverished and desperately in need of food, clean water and medical care. That would be bad in any circumstances, but they are also living in daily fear of death coming from the skies—from airstrikes in the east of Aleppo and from mortar bombs in the west. The scale of suffering is beyond our comprehension. We should be in no doubt that the parties responsible for that—whether it is the Russian forces and the Assad regime on one side, or the jihadists of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, otherwise known as the al-Nusra Front or al-Qaeda—stand equally condemned in the eyes of public opinion and are equally guilty of crimes against humanity. In time, there must be a reckoning for those crimes. That is why we support the efforts of France to enforce a tougher approach at the Security Council to the violations of international humanitarian law. Will the Foreign Secretary be supporting the French Government in those efforts?

Equally, the effort to hold the Russian forces and others to account for their actions, and the anger that people rightly feel here, must not prevent us, difficult as it is, from seeking to work with the Russian Government to restore the Kerry-Lavrov peace process. That means securing and maintaining a ceasefire, isolating the jihadists and opening safe channels for humanitarian aid—we should make that the basis to negotiate a lasting peace. Looking at the situation today, we accept that that could not look further a way or seem more difficult, but we need to have that goal in mind. It is the only conceivable solution and the only way to bring relief to the people of Aleppo, so how do we do it?

Mr Bradshaw: There is no ceasefire.

Emily Thornberry: Absolutely there is not a ceasefire now; that is what I am moving on to. Of course there is no ceasefire, and there needs to be an initiative. In the end, we all know that we can move forward only by way of negotiations, and that no negotiations will happen without a ceasefire.

Angela Smith: Can my hon. Friend present us with the evidence that she clearly has that it is realistic to believe that the Russians will seriously engage in further ceasefire negotiations? Does she think for a minute that they will stop bombing Aleppo while they are doing that?

Emily Thornberry: I have thought about this a great deal and spoken to a number of experts about it, and I have some suggestions that I wish to make to the House and to put before the Secretary of State. We want to be helpful. If she will give me a moment, I will explain.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): If the peace that we all want is not achievable, will the hon. Lady support the application of military force, if it is needed?

Emily Thornberry: I am not a pacifist, personally. I believe in using military force when it can be effective, if we can achieve the ends that we have identified, and if we know what we want to achieve. I believe that in a multi-layered, multifaceted civil war such as that in Syria, the last thing that we need is more parties bombing. We need a ceasefire and for people to draw back.

Tom Tugendhat: While we all look for peace, does the hon. Lady agree that sometimes backing down, looking weak and hiding one’s head achieves quite the reverse? It encourages violence, treachery and the brutality that we are seeing today.

Emily Thornberry: Yes, I agree, but let us be strong about this and let us put forward a plan that might work. If the hon. Gentleman will give me a moment, I will explain what I am suggesting.

I was recommending that, despite the difficulties and the anger that many parties feel, we work with the Russian Government to restore the Kerry-Lavrov peace process. That means securing and maintaining a ceasefire, isolating the jihadists and opening safe channels for humanitarian aid—we should make that the basis to negotiate a lasting peace. Looking at the situation today, we accept that that could not look further away or seem more difficult, but we need to have that goal in mind. It is the only conceivable solution and the only way to bring relief to the people of Aleppo, so how do we do it?

Mr Bradshaw: We had a ceasefire; it was brutally blown apart by Russian and Syrian air power. I still have not heard from my hon. Friend a clear and unequivocal condemnation of Russia’s and Assad’s action. I have not heard her call it out as it is—a war crime.

Emily Thornberry: I apologise to my right hon. Friend. I thought that that was exactly what I said. For the avoidance of any doubt—obviously, it is now in Hansard—of course the actions of the Russians can well be seen as war crimes. A number of war crimes have been committed during this terrible war, and as I said at the outset, there are the war crimes of Assad and Russia, and the war crimes of the jihadists. In time, we will expect those war crimes to come before the international courts, and those people should and must be held to account. It was for that reason—perhaps my right hon. Friend did not hear me—that I urged the Government to support French efforts to ensure that more initiatives are taken to bring the parties to international justice.

Mr Speaker, many people are getting impatient that I have not yet put forward my plan, so perhaps I will not take any more interventions at the moment so that I can actually do that.

What is the only conceivable way of bringing relief to the people of Aleppo? I believe that it will require strong statesmanship on all sides and not more brinkmanship. We need not to talk to experts in the field. Their concern is not just how we stop the conflict as it stands, but how we avoid it escalating further. Yesterday, one expert said to me:
“On the ground, we are just one bad decision away...from Russian and American forces ending up in armed conflict.”

Facing that chilling prospect, we must all work for the alternative, and we need to start by looking carefully at the plan put forward by the UN Syria envoy Staffan de Mistura. The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield has already referred to it, and I respectfully agree with him. Staffan de Mistura has bravely promised that if the jihadi forces of Jabhat Fateh al-Sham agree to leave the city of Aleppo, he will personally escort them from the siege to Idlib, or wherever they wish to go. Such a move would isolate the jihadi fighters from the moderate rebels inside Aleppo and remove from the Russians and the Syrian forces their current pretext for the bombardment of east Aleppo. That process could—I stress it only could—provide the basis to restore talks on a ceasefire and on opening up the humanitarian channels that we all wish to see.

There is a precedent for such a step in the way the Jabhat fighters were escorted out of Homs and other towns in Syria. While we must treat the Russian assurances with caution, it is an approach that Sergei Lavrov has said they are ready to support and can persuade the Assad regime to agree to, so will the Government lend their support to the plan put forward by the United Nations? The Government have yet to respond to the initiative at all. I believe that it is a serious initiative with some prospect of hope in it, and that it should not be ignored. Will they persuade their French and US counterparts to do likewise and seek to use this pragmatic proposal as the basis to restart talks?

While we are rightly focused on Syria today, we know that many other countries in the world will listen to what we say about Syria, look at the values that we claim to uphold and ask whether we are true to those values when it comes to other countries and conflicts. Today we will hear Members from all parties rightly condemn Russia and Assad for the airstrikes against civilian targets. We will hear calls for independent UN investigations into breaches of international humanitarian law. We will hear calls to take further action against Russia to oblige it to cease the bombardment. While that is all correct, if we say those things about Russia and Aleppo, we must be prepared for what is said about Saudi Arabia and Yemen. We cannot condemn one and continue selling arms to the other. We cannot call for investigations into one and say that we are happy for the other to investigate themselves. We cannot pour scorn on the assurances of one that they have not hit civilian targets while blithely accepting the assurances of the other. Most of all, we cannot cry for the people of Aleppo and the suffering that they face while turning a blind eye to the 1 million children in Yemen facing starvation today. So I ask the Foreign Secretary to tell the House how the actions that the Government propose in Syria compare with the actions that they are taking in Yemen.

The suffering of Aleppo has gone on for too long. Every day that it continues, we must redouble our efforts to end it. We suggest a four-point plan to the Government. We suggest that we begin with more statesmanship and less brinkmanship. Secondly, we must adopt the UN plan to escort the jihadi from Aleppo. Thirdly, the Kerry-Lavrov plan needs to be revived and we must work together towards a lasting peace. Fourthly, we must de-escalate overseas military involvement in the conflict from all 14 other nations involved, including ourselves. That is how we will create safe corridors for aid, stop the destruction of Aleppo by Christmas and end the suffering of its people.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Before we proceed further, I have seen how many people wish to contribute. I do not want to impose a time limit on Back-Bench speeches at this stage, but if, by voluntary co-operation, we can achieve the objective, that would be better. If each Back Bencher spoke for no more than seven minutes, everybody would get in, and there should be general contentment. There is never universal contentment, but I would settle for general contentment. We will be led in this mission by no less a figure than Mr Alistair Burt.

1.29 pm

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I start by congratulating my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) on initiating the debate and on opening it in such an extraordinary fashion. His deep personal commitment, which he has exhibited over a number of years, to those in the Syrian National Coalition and the High Negotiations Committee and others has been evident in what he has said. He has long championed their needs, and that was evident today.

I thank the hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), who spoke for the Opposition, for proposing a difficult case in trying to find an answer. There are no easy answers, but I hope that a little bit of background will help further.

I pay tribute to those in the Syrian National Coalition and those who have worked for peace in Syria over a lengthy period. I met members of the Syrian National Coalition. I met them in Gaziantep. I met them in Jordan. I met them Paris. I met them in London. I met Riad Hijab. Part of the background is to recognise that what has happened in Syria today did not just spring out of events in 2011—the Syrian regime has long been repressive, and the roots go back a long time and are very deep—but not to recognise the extraordinary courage of people in Syria to make a political case for change, which has been the cause of so many deaths in Syria over many decades, is to miss something. They have consistently proposed a plan for a democratic Syria, with the engagement of all elements of the community, and they have done so for several years. Again, any future for Syria must recognise that the SNC and the High Negotiations Committee have had a plan for a long time, and I wish they had been listened to even earlier.

While in Gaziantep in Turkey I met members of the White Helmets. At that time, the Foreign Office was working to support its members and give them training in their work, and they have done an extraordinary job in the chaos and disaster that is Syria. The work of the White Helmets has been quite extraordinary. Again, we need to pay tribute to the White Helmets, as we do to those such as David Nott, the surgeon who has worked in the extraordinary circumstances of the hospitals in Syria and who writes so eloquently on the subject.

The United Kingdom has to look at many parts of this issue in terms of what has been achieved. We have played a part in trying to alleviate some of the suffering. There is little need, I am sure, to elaborate further on
the degree of suffering. We have seen it on the television. We have seen the brave films produced by BBC “Panorama”, giving cameras to people. There has been what our excellent ambassador to the UN, Matthew Rycroft, described only last week as “an onslaught of cruelty” in Aleppo, which he said could not possibly be the work of the Syrian forces on their own.

The tragedy of Aleppo and Syria is that it is an entirely human construct devoid of any natural disaster component. It has happened in front of our eyes—eyes that have witnessed in my time as a Member Rwanda and Srebrenica too. It has happened with so many other memories of previous conflicts in our minds. It has happened because of, as much as despite of, international mechanisms such as the UN and the International Criminal Court—mechanisms that we have all hidden behind, to a certain extent, believing that they could find the answer, as we watched them being stripped of their authority, week by week, action by action in Syria, and actually reduced to ridicule. If international mechanisms cannot prevent an Aleppo, what actually can they now prevent?

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, who was one of the best Ministers in the Foreign Office over a long period, for bringing great knowledge to the House from what he did in the Foreign Office. Many Syrians in my constituency—I meet them regularly—say that they just want people to give them some help. He mentions some international organisations, but does he think that the UN is doing enough? If it is not doing enough, do we need to consider reforming that organisation, so that it can help in such crises?

Alistair Burt: The point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield and myself, and the point of the hon. Gentleman’s question, is that Syria demonstrates the failure of these international mechanisms now. If a veto is continually used on the UN Security Council, what can we do? My right hon. Friend rightly argued—this was recognised on both sides of the House—that the League of Nations was damaged by the stripping of its authority. That is the point that we have reached, and if we cannot rely on these mechanisms, what are we now going to do?

Bob Stewart: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Alistair Burt: I shall give way very briefly, but I am being fair to Mr Speaker by trying to keep the intervention short.

Bob Stewart: The veto in the Security Council by Russia will kill any plan stone dead. Perhaps this is a chance for the General Assembly to get some power and do something about it.

Alistair Burt: There may be international mechanisms that involve talk, but perhaps there are other things that we can do, and I think that that will be the mood of the House.

A little bit of history will provide a pointer forward; we need not review it all. Assad knew exactly what he was doing when the revolt started in 2011. Syria was not beset by radical Islam, but he released prisoners from his prisons to join radical Islamic bands because he wanted to create the narrative of his providing stability against terrorism. The narrative has succeeded. It gave him the excuse to attack his own people. That reached a nadir in 2013, with chemical weapons attack on his people. That was a fundamental point. I am not going to rehearse what was said in the House—there are reasons for colleagues to make the decisions that they did—but by stepping back at that moment, the moment not to destroy Assad but to get him back to the negotiating table by convincing him that something would stand in his way was lost.

Nadhim Zahawi: Inaction has consequences, and the consequences of inaction in 2013 are seen in Aleppo today.

Alistair Burt: They are; we learned that intervention has consequences, but so does non-intervention. We talk about non-intervention, but Syria has had intervention from Russia, from Hezbollah and from the Iranians. I remember briefings in the House, talking to colleagues and saying that, if the ultimate answer to Syria is a victory for Assad, for Russia, for Iran and for Hezbollah, and if we think that that will be in the United Kingdom’s best interests, I think we ought to think again. So we move on, and it is all very well to hear the history.

The involvement of Russia, which the hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury bravely mentioned, is a crucial part. Russia needs to understand that savagery stokes terrorism; it does not end it. Russia is rightly concerned about the possibility of radicalism in Chechnya and all that, but its efforts to deal with it are failing. Part of this discussion is being very clear that what is happening and what Russia is doing will fuel the terrorism of the future and will do nothing to prevent it.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that one of the reasons why some of us are so concerned about the Government’s approach to Russia is the evidence in Syria that Russia is not targeting ISIS? The number of air strikes by the Russian forces against ISIS has decreased by 10% in the past year alone, so it is clear that they have another agenda, and they should be called out on that, and rightly so, as soon as possible.

Alistair Burt: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. Anyone who thought that Russia had any other agenda was fooling themselves. Russia’s agenda in the area is very mixed. First, it is to provide a bulwark against radical Islam in its own country. Secondly, it is to demonstrate to people in the region that it is now a power, as it has seen the United States retreat. Thirdly, it is to consolidate its own interests, which do indeed go very deep. But that vacuum is now being seized, so what do we do?

I turn to what my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield said towards the end of his remarks. This is about an effort of will. The fundamental failure in Syria in the past couple of years has been to give an impression that no one would stand up against the attacks on people in Syria because we have lost the will, not to advance an ideological agenda, but to defend and protect people. That is what R2P is about. The calculation is whether trying to enforce a no-fly zone, trying to
Aleppo and Syria

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Alistair Burt: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention, because what she says is exactly right. Those who are killing civilians in Aleppo are relying on the fact that we fear escalation and we worry. People therefore do nothing. We did not know what the consequences of 2013 would be, and we worried about intervention. However, we know now, and accordingly, we know what will happen in Aleppo over the next few months if nothing is done. That is the point that we have reached. Ultimately, we are talking about an act of will. If a force determined to do the unspeakable is met with moral argument but little else, the determined force will win. We have reached the stage at which we have to declare—I look forward to the Foreign Secretary making this clear—that that is a point beyond which we are no longer prepared to go.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) made a succinct speech from the Front Bench; that is the length of speech that I know the Scottish National party spokesperson will seek to imitate.

1.41 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am aware that a lot of colleagues want to get in. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) on securing the debate, and thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting the House leave to hold it. It is an emergency debate in every sense of the word; it is urgent and necessary for us to have the debate, because the situation in Aleppo and across Syria has dramatically worsened from the already nearly catastrophic state that the conflict has brought about.

As others have said, the turning point in recent weeks seems to have been the bombing of the UN aid convoy on 19 September. If that and other atrocities are called out as being war crimes, they should be investigated, and the perpetrators must be brought to justice. That event ended the tentative ceasefire; hostilities, particularly by Russia, have increased since then. Some 275,000 people in eastern Aleppo, over 100,000 of whom are children, face daily bombing. The UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, described the situation as “worse than a slaughterhouse”, and others, including rebel groups inside the city, effectively see the enactment of a scorched earth policy by the Assad regime. Over 1 million people have been killed since the conflict began in 2011, so we should not be surprised at the comparisons with Rwanda and Srebrenica. It was absolutely right to make time for today’s debate.

I want to consider briefly responses so far from across the UK and the world, and the options available to the UK Government and the world community. The Scottish National party has consistently been opposed to military action, and has consistently called for a negotiated settlement and significant humanitarian intervention. When this House debated whether to join the bombing campaign, we warned that becoming a party to the conflict would reduce the UK’s ability to be an arbiter in any resolution, and so it has proved. We welcome the response, led by the Department for International Development, in terms of humanitarian support, but there is further to go. We have consistently said that what people in Syria need is bread, not bombs. If we have the technology to drop bombs, surely we have the technology to drop or deliver bread and aid.

The Scottish Government, with their limited power and resources in this area, have played as active a role as they could. In March 2013, they donated £100,000 to the Disasters Emergency Committee, and they later doubled that to £200,000. Earlier this year, the First Minister accepted an invitation from the UN special envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, to host an international women’s summit in Edinburgh, focused on supporting Syrian women, so that they can engage in communication, negotiation, and post-conflict planning, and become a key part of the peace process.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): I am sure that all of us want a negotiated end to the problems in Syria, but does the hon. Gentleman not accept that the timid approach of America and other allied forces has led to the encouragement of the Russians, who have escalated their military involvement and its brutality?

Patrick Grady: I will come on to the geopolitics and relations between the United States and Russia, but the answer has clearly not been for the UK to dive in and continue to add to the chaos and bombing.

The Scottish Government have continued to try to play a role. They announced in August 2015 that they would contribute up to £300,000 to the 1325 Fellowship programme facilitated by Beyond Borders Scotland—another initiative that trains women in prevention and resolution of conflict. It was set up in response to UN resolution 1325, which reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts. We in Scotland and the Scottish Government have been keen to make a positive contribution wherever possible. Of course, many people across the country have joined in the efforts to welcome refugees, especially from Syria, who have come here seeking stability and peace.

Peace in Syria seems as far away as it was at the start of the conflict. Russia and the United States have completely different aims for the region, particularly as regards President Assad’s role, or otherwise, in the country’s future. There is a worrying risk of the situation becoming a proxy for broader tensions between the two countries, and indeed of further backsliding in international relations more generally. That is why the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield is right to question the
stalemate’s impact on the role of the United Nations. It has never been more necessary for the UN to play a role, yet in this area at least, it seems that the impasse has never been more difficult to breach.

There have rightly been calls for the General Assembly to be more outspoken where the Security Council cannot reach agreement; that would be a start, but the GA still lacks the teeth of the Security Council. The UK’s seat on the Security Council is supposed to be one of the great defining assets of the Union, putting the great into Great Britain. While I welcome the strong words of the UK representative at recent meetings, strong words are increasingly not enough. It is for the United Nations and the International Syria Support Group to facilitate a peaceful settlement, and the United Kingdom Government should seek to make sure that the UN has the mandate and the support that it needs.

In the meantime, there must be more that the Government can do, either independently or with allies. I have already said that if we have the technology to drop bombs, surely we have the technology to drop aid, but we also need the ability, stability and permission to provide aid, especially to areas controlled by the Assad regime. Negotiating a safe space for that ought to be part of the UK’s diplomatic efforts. If that means that a no-fly zone could help, then that should be explored, but it needs to be properly enforced.

Getting aid—medical, food and non-food relief—into the country, and into Aleppo in particular, should be the No. 1 priority for humanitarian agencies in the country. If the big and multilateral agencies are having difficulty with that, more support should be given to local actors, especially those coming from faith-based or community-based organisations. I join in the tributes notes of caution about DFID’s role and response. I have already said that if we have the technology to provide aid, especially to areas controlled by the Assad regime. Negotiating a safe space for that ought to be part of the UK’s diplomatic efforts. If that means that a no-fly zone could help, then that should be explored, but it needs to be properly enforced.

Support also has to be provided in the refugee camps, both in Syria and in the surrounding areas. I was visited last week by a former constituent, Tony Collins, who now lives in Lebanon, where he assists the aid effort on the ground—in the camps. He describes the situation as no longer an emergency, but endemic, and as having a major impact, as we have heard from Members, on the future of Lebanon. UK humanitarian support has to provide emergency relief, but also look at long-term economic development, and the impact that these profound movements of people are having.

The Minister of State, Department for International Development, the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart) is still here; the Secretary of State for International Development has left. I sound notes of caution about DFID’s role and response. I have said many times that while conflating some aspects of security and aid spending may be permitted under OECD rules, it is not what people expect to happen when the Government say that they are meeting the target of giving 2% of gross national income to NATO and the 0.7% target for aid spending. These targets should be met and accounted for separately; the situation in Syria in particular shows why that is necessary.

DFID also needs to think about the longer-term impacts of its policies, and consequential effects that might not be seen at the time. The withdrawal of programme partnership arrangement funds from many organisations is leading them to withdraw from areas, or wind up altogether, and that has a long-term impact that might not be seen at present, yet need is vastly increasing. Of course, support for refugees here needs to increase as well. The UK is committed to taking 20,000 over five years, but that is nowhere near our fair share.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): While the UK Government are right to focus their efforts on providing aid in the region, the refugees we have agreed to take, particularly under the community sponsorship scheme, include only 2% of Christian refugees from Syria, despite the fact that religious minorities constitute up to 12% of the Syrian population. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need to make more effort to reach out to frightened religious minorities in Syria?

Patrick Grady: Yes, absolutely, I agree that persecuted minorities need to be given special attention. The House as a whole has given the Government a mandate to act on the genocide of the Yazidi community. The support provided for refugees needs to go beyond simply meeting physical requirements. I have constituents who are traumatised by their experiences in Syria and elsewhere, and mental health support will be increasingly important.

I am conscious of time. The Government say that they are leading the humanitarian response, but that does not mean that they cannot go further. They must rethink their military objectives. We were told in December last year that UK air strikes would cut off the head of the snake, but the chaos has only increased, and the people of Aleppo are paying the price. The UK urgently needs to rethink its military strategy, and it needs to commit to working across borders and interests to find a sustainable and lasting peace. While that goes on, the aid effort must be stepped up for the sake of people in Aleppo, Syria, the region and, indeed, the world.

1.51 pm

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady). I shall keep my speech brief, but I want to begin by congratulating my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) on securing the debate and commending him for the way in which he made the case yesterday and brought the matter to the attention of the House. It was a powerful, passionate speech that was also practical, and I trust that Ministers listened to every word and will consider the recommendations and suggestions he made. He was exactly right yesterday to describe the situation in Aleppo as an “unfolding humanitarian catastrophe”.

I share the deep, deep concern that my right hon. Friend expressed, and I believe that the House should send the strongest possible signal at this time, both to our own Government and to other Governments, that the present suffering of innocent civilians in Aleppo is unacceptable; that the criminal acts of the Syrian and Russian forces are unacceptable, not least the bombing of hospitals, schools and humanitarian supplies; and
that the seeming impotence of the international community in the face of such acts must not, and cannot, be allowed to continue.

As the debate on the statement by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union demonstrated, the attention of the House in the coming months will be consumed, overwhelmingly and necessarily, by issues relating to our withdrawal from the European Union. We will debate and argue about how best to protect our national interest in the Brexit process and how we give our nation the best chance of future prosperity to protect the quality of our lives and those of our children. We will even have debates about debates.

Today’s debate, however, demonstrates that the House remembers its duty to look outwards and have regard for that part of humanity that does not live within our borders. With you in the Chair, Mr Speaker, I am confident that the House will always make time available for us to speak with clarity and unity when confronted with suffering on the scale that we have witnessed in Syria in recent days. We should not underestimate the interest of the outside world in what is said in the House. A number of us have received emails today from groups within Syria who are watching the debate, and who want that clarity and unity expressed by hon. Members.

I pay tribute to the clarity of voice that our Foreign Secretary has brought to bear on the international stage on the subject of the Syrian conflict. He was one of the very first to describe the attacks on the Red Crescent aid convoy three weeks ago as a war crime—that was exactly what they were—and directly to implicate Russian forces. However, in commending the Foreign Secretary may I ask him to update the House on his most recent discussions with Foreign Minister Lavrov about the events in Aleppo and what further representations he plans to make? Will he leave us in no doubt whatsoever of his determination to ensure that the Russians know that we will keep up the pressure in the wake of their illegal acts in Syria, and that as the days slip by our anger and disgust at the acts for which they are responsible will not subside?

As has been said, President Hollande of France has stated in the past 24 hours that there should be a role for the International Criminal Court in holding Moscow to account for its actions. What consideration has my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary given to that suggestion and any other processes, including at the UN, for upholding international law on Syria?

Bob Stewart: On the International Criminal Court, I am worried that any action would be hamstrung by Russia in the Security Council, which in some way controls the ICC. I speak as someone who has given evidence in five trials there.

Stephen Crabb: My hon. Friend is right to express those concerns. The ICC has not proved itself effective in many respects in upholding international law, but we have a new opportunity. As my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) said, a lot of this boils down to an effort of will on the part of the international community. I shall come on to address that point.

Emily Thornberry: Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that one problem with the ICC is that not enough countries, including some influential ones, are members. Perhaps an international lead from some of our larger friends would be of great assistance.

Stephen Crabb: The Opposition spokeswoman makes an important point. Far too many countries have not signed up to the ICC, and a job for our diplomacy in the months and years ahead is to encourage buy-in to the court. Will my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary update us on any discussions that he has had with his French counterpart before the scheduled visit by President Putin to France next week, and on the need to ensure that there is a united stance by international allies when discussing the latest events in Syria?

I welcome the business-like tone struck by the Prime Minister when she met President Putin at the beginning of September at the G20. It is right that our initial posture should be one of reaching out and seeking improved relations with Moscow, but one can be forgiven for thinking that Putin is taking the west, including us, for fools, in the belief that the distraction of a US presidential election and Brexit means that there is neither international interest nor resolve to try to stop the brutal and so far effective power play that he has undertaken in Syria.

Aleppo is a litmus test of whether Russia wants to play a constructive role in the region and whether it is willing to work in collaboration with the international coalition to bring peace to Syria, acknowledging that its interests may be different in key respects. Unfortunately, the events of recent weeks demonstrate that it has failed that test and that its behaviour is not consistent with that of a responsible actor. It behaves instead like a thuggish gangster regime flouting international law at will.

We can be business-like in our relations with Russia, but that does not mean business as usual when Russia behaves shamelessly in attacks on innocent civilians in Aleppo and then defeating attempts at the UN to secure some respite from the hostilities. The bombing campaign in Aleppo amounts to a war against children. Almost half of the casualties since the current attack began have been children, as bombs and mortars have landed on hospitals and broken through underground bunkers that sometimes also serve as schools. Last week, newspapers carried photographs of children playing in water-filled craters in the ground created by bombs and mortars—images, I suppose, of innocence amidst the conflict. The images that we should hold before us are others that we have seen in the past fortnight: the lifeless, dusty, broken-limbed bodies of children being removed—exhumed—from bombed-out buildings and piles of rubble. This is indeed a war against children.

In conclusion, the point has been made several times this afternoon that there are no easy solutions. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield described in some detail the complexity of the challenge before us. My right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire made a really powerful point when he discussed the effort of will needed from the international community, with leadership from us, to show that there is a resolve to make progress and to hold Russia in particular to account for its actions, given its responsibilities
as the key player at this moment in time in achieving respite from the bombings to secure an enforced ceasefire, including safe passage for humanitarian supplies while allowing room for a diplomatic process that might possibly stand a chance of achieving some lasting peace.

We have heard practical suggestions this afternoon, such as having a no-fly zone and discussion of economic sanctions as a way of bringing more pressure to bear on Russia. I will be particularly interested to hear the Foreign Secretary’s response to those two suggestions, and on what more the Government can do to show leadership and increase the international resolve and will.

2 pm

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Much has been written about Syria and Aleppo in recent months. Parliament has not been sitting, so some of us have been left to tweet our continuing concern about the events unfolding in that country day after day. One of the best articles on Syria that I have read recently was in *The Guardian* on Saturday, under the headline “We are watching the destruction of Aleppo. Where is the rage?" It was written by Natalie Nouayrede. It was very poignant, and I suggest that other Members look at it.

That is the question: where is the rage? Where are the demonstrations that we have seen on so many previous occasions—I have taken part in them myself—for example on Iraq, East Timor and Cambodia. Where are those demonstrations now? I want to see—I challenge the people listening to this debate to see—I challenge the people listening to this debate—to see what we think of their actions in Syria and their refusal to bring peace to that country. Russia used carpet bombing tactics in Grozny, and we all know what happened there. The west cannot stay silent, because we know how this could end.

The current UN special envoy to Syria, Staffan de Mistura, is an old friend of mine; in the past we worked together on Iraq. He has warned that rebel-held eastern Aleppo could face total destruction by Christmas and that thousands of Syrian civilians—not terrorists—could die if the current assault on the city by Russian and Syrian forces is not stopped. He has called for the shelling of the city to stop immediately and for the UN to be allowed to take aid supplies into rebel-held areas. Eastern Aleppo has received no humanitarian assistance for the past three months, and food and medical supplies are running at dangerously low levels.

Staffan de Mistura has also offered to go to the besieged area of the city and personally escort al-Qaeda-linked fighters out of the city, in an appeal to stop the current bombing campaign. At least 250,000 people are thought to be trapped in eastern Aleppo, where rebel supply lines were cut off by President Bashar al-Assad’s troops in July. According to the UN, a renewed aerial and ground campaign to retake opposition-held areas has left hundreds of civilians dead and damaged hospitals, water plants and bakeries. Médecins sans Frontières has reported 23 attacks on medical facilities in eastern Aleppo since July, and all of us have seen on “Newsnight” and other programmes the bravery of the doctors and nurses in those hospitals—there is probably only one hospital remaining—saving lives by video link. We are particularly grateful to the British doctor who has been doing that.

A psychologist on the ground has said that 75% of children in Aleppo have post-traumatic stress disorder, and that 50% of those between the ages of nine and 13 are incontinent as a result. More than 100 children were killed only last week. The US Secretary of State, John Kerry, has said that the bombing campaign is a targeted strategy to terrorise civilians and kill anybody and everybody who is in the way of Syrian and Russian military objectives. The UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, has called eastern Aleppo “worse than a slaughterhouse”. Syria, backed by Russia, says that it is targeting militants in the city who use civilians as human shields. However, as Staffan de Mistura has pointed out, the presence of about 900 former or current Jabhat al-Nusra—it now calls itself Jabhat Fatah al-Sham—fighters cannot justify the destruction wrought on the city in the past two weeks, following the collapse of a US-Russian-brokered ceasefire.

Staffan de Mistura has also said:

“There is only one thing we are not ready to do: be passive, resign ourselves to another Srebrenica, another Rwanda, which we are sadly ready to recognise written on that wall in front of us, unless something takes place.”

He warned that history would judge decision makers in Damascus and Moscow for the misery imposed on eastern Aleppo citizens through the fighting. Our own Foreign Secretary—he is sitting on the Front Bench—along with the US Secretary of State, has accused Russia of war crimes and said that the country should be held accountable for allegedly bombing aid convoys in Syria.

We do not have to wait for the International Criminal Court. Indict, an organisation that I chaired, collected evidence on Iraqi war crimes years before they were heard. That can be done again, for example through the Foreign Office. The testimony that we collected from hundreds of people about Saddam’s regime was subsequently used in the trials in Baghdad. I sat there myself to hear some of the people accused of those dreadful war crimes being judged, so it can be done.

US attempts to establish a long-lasting ceasefire and further talks have been thwarted, with the US finally breaking off talks with Russia, citing Moscow’s unacceptable backing of Assad’s Aleppo campaign. An attempt made only this weekend to pass a Franco-Spanish-sponsored UN Security Council resolution, which called for an end to the bombing of the city by Syrian and Russian jets, was vetoed by Russia, which argued that the distorted resolution would provide cover to terrorists. During heated exchanges in the Security Council on Saturday, the UK ambassador to the UN, Matthew Rycroft—I also worked with him on Iraq over a period of time—said:

“This council cannot stand by while such misery is meted out on the people of Aleppo. And yet, thanks to you, Mr President,—the Russian President—

“that is exactly what we are doing. Thanks to your actions today, Syrians will continue to lose their lives in Aleppo and beyond to Russian and Syrian bombing. Please stop now.”

What is the international community going to do? We have heard several suggestions this morning. How are we going to prevent another Rwanda? If Russia will not end its military aggression in Syria in support of President Assad, and there is no sign that it will do so any time
soon, with the Russian Parliament having voted recently
to give Putin authority to keep war planes in Syria
indefinitely—and with the Russian military obliquely
warning that it would use anti-aircraft missiles to attack
any US jet that tried to strike the Syrian regime—are we
doomed to watch this unfolding tragedy, this genocide
in the making? Will we continue to feel utterly impotent?

I would like quickly to suggest a few things that have
been advanced from a number of quarters today. We
must better protect civilians now and in future, because
in the middle of this appalling conflict civilian protection
has to be prioritised. First, we have to get assistance to
Syrian civilians in eastern Aleppo and other besieged
areas fast. It is now over four months since the International
Syria Support Group set a deadline of 1 June for
airdrops and airlifts to communities under siege—a
proposal the UK took credit for. In those four months, there
has not been one single airdrop or airlift to territory
under siege by the Assad regime. As of 5 October, there
have been 131 UN airdrops to regime-held Deir Ezzor,
which is under siege by ISIS, and 104 airlifts to the
regime-held al-Qamishli airport. There have also been
airdrops by regime aircraft to the besieged regime towns
of Foua and Kefraya. However, despite the large number
of UN airdrops and airlifts to regime-held territory, the
Assad regime will not grant the UN permission to drop
aid to the areas the regime is besieging. As well as
alleviating human suffering in the short term, airlifts
to those areas could play an important part in alleviating
human suffering in the longer term by breaking the
Assad regime’s stranglehold over aid.

The UK Government should therefore now ensure
that their own proposal can be implemented. The UK
has the experience and the capacity to airdrop food and
medical aid to besieged communities from its bases in
Cyprus. It has the military might to deter attacks on its
aircraft. Suitable partners on the ground are available—
through local councils, medical care and relief organisations,
and others—to co-ordinate drop zones and aid distribution.
Putin is already carrying out airdrops every day to help
those he protects. The UK military and its allies delivering
airdrops and airlifts should be understood not as a
logistical second-best option for delivering aid but as
a means of pressing for proper ground access for
humanitarian organisations.

Secondly, the international community should and
could institute a no-fly zone for Syrian helicopters. It is
Syrian helicopters that drop the illegal barrel bombs
full of napalm, chemical weapons and high explosives.
It is estimated that such a no-fly zone could reduce
civilian deaths by roughly 90%. In that respect, I shall
always be grateful to John Major. When I was shadow
International Development Secretary, I went to Kurdistan.
People there asked me whether I could ask the Prime
Minister to institute no-fly zones. He asked to see me,
and I went to see him. Within a week, those no-fly zones
were in place. It can be done—it has been done, and it
could be done again.

Thirdly, we must ensure that Russians and Syrians
responsible for this cruel and constant bombing are
ultimately held to account. The UK and others should
track Russian and Assad regime aircraft and publish
regular timely reports on which aircraft, from which
base, are responsible for each potential war crime. The
UK has military assets in the region that could make
the difference. An aircraft-tracking system that named
and shamed Russian and Syrian aircraft bombing hospitals
might encourage Putin to stop this slaughter. UK AWACS
aircraft and Type 45 destroyers already based just off
the coast of Syria could monitor and police such a
system. That would establish that evidence was being
collected for future prosecutions and that all those
responsible in the chain of command risked being
implicated. Although Russia would be able to use its
Security Council veto to block any attempt to refer it or
the Bashar al-Assad regime to the International Criminal
Court, other avenues to obtain justice should be explored.
Earlier this week, the United Nations Commission on
Human Rights called for countries to be stripped of
their veto powers if they blocked war crimes investigations.
The vast majority of countries around the world support
the idea of denying the possibility of a veto in situations
of mass atrocities.

Finally, in the light of the UN Security Council’s
current intransigence, the UN General Assembly should
hold an emergency meeting, demand an end to unlawful
attacks on civilians in Aleppo, and explore avenues for
accountability. We have to make it crystal clear to the
Russian and Syrian Governments that their actions are
deplorable. We need to speak up for and on behalf of
our common humanity. I therefore call once again on
everyone who cares about the plight of Syrian civilians
to picket the Russian embassy in London and its embassies
in capitals around the world. For two million, 2 million,
3 million, 4 million people—it can be done, and it
has been done in the past. That should carry on until the
bombing campaign stops and all the relevant players
are forced to get around the table to end this horrible
war.

2.15 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op):
It is a pleasure to follow my right hon. Friend the
Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), who has been
such a powerful, consistent and long-standing voice on
these issues in the House. I pay tribute to the right hon.
Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) and to my
hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison
McGovern) for securing this important debate.

The situation in Syria is truly horrendous, and I want
to focus on the humanitarian catastrophe. In Aleppo
and the Idlib governorate, 2 million people are living
without water or electricity, and there are attacks on
health facilities. Across Syria as a whole, there are
470,000 people who have lost their lives, 8 million people
who are internally displaced and more than 4 million
refugees.

We can rightly be proud of our role in providing aid
in the region, and I welcome the Under-Secretary of
State for International Development to his place. We
have seen £1.35 billion in UK aid to the region since
2012—money well spent. However, concern has been
raised by a range of humanitarian, civil society and
human rights organisations that the Assad regime is
controlling deliveries of aid to the detriment of rebel-held
areas. That raises serious questions for the United
Nations—questions I would like the Government to
raise with it.

May I echo what the right hon. Gentleman said
about the heroic efforts of Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey
in coping with the massive numbers of refugees coming
to their countries? The International Development Committee recognised that in its report in January on the Syrian refugee crisis. We also said in that report that we would welcome a decision by the Government to resettle 3,000 unaccompanied children. I would like an update today from the Government on what progress they are making on the former Prime Minister’s pledge to take 20,000 vulnerable people through a resettlement scheme, on the pledge to take 3,000 vulnerable children from the region and on the pledge to take children from Greece, Italy and France. I raised that yesterday with the Home Secretary, who said that around 50 children have been accepted so far. I would like to see that accelerated, because we have a duty to act here, in the same way that we have a duty to act there.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an extraordinarily powerful point. However, the resettlement programme is absolutely stuck in the mud. In Greater Manchester, agreement cannot be reached between the city authorities and the Government because the Government refuse to pay the money that is required to get these children and other Syrian refugees to Manchester, where we are willing to accept them. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Stephen Twigg: I do agree with my hon. Friend. The people of Liverpool have made a similar pledge, as have the city council and the mayor of Liverpool. The National Audit Office published a report last month on this very issue, in which it praised the progress made by local government in the last year but pointed to some of the issues my hon. Friend has highlighted—not least that it is not clear what funding will be available to support local authorities beyond the first-year costs.

Will the Foreign Secretary address another aspect of the current crisis? Some 70,000 Syrian refugees are currently in what is known as the “berm”, which is a demilitarised zone between Syria and Jordan. Those 70,000 people are, effectively, being prevented from going to the safe space of Jordan. Our former colleague, Stephen O’Brien, who is now the head of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, has described conditions at the berm as truly dire. My understanding is that a plan to deal with the crisis has been agreed by the United Nations but not yet by Jordan. Will the Foreign Secretary use his good offices to pursue this as a matter of urgency with the Jordanian Government?

Earlier this year the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield and another former International Development Secretary, Clare Short, brought to the International Development Committee’s attention the issue of the unintended consequences of counter-terrorism legislation for the delivery of aid. Several non-governmental organisations have been in touch with the Committee in recent weeks to raise that question and, in particular, two areas that require action from the Government.

The first area is the need to ease the concerns of banks. My understanding is that even when NGOs are fully compliant with counter-terrorism legislation, banks are sometimes nervous about lending, leading to delays in processing payments and the aid not getting delivered. The second is the need to use our good offices with Turkey. My understanding is that it is not always easy for NGOs to function on the Turkish side of the border region between Syria and Turkey. For example, Syria Relief UK has told us that it has been waiting for its application to establish an office in southern Turkey to be processed, and that the Turkish authorities can be overly restrictive about the means by which they allow funds to be transferred to Syria. I realise these are rather technical points, but they are about how aid can most effectively be delivered, and I would be grateful to Ministers if they addressed those points during this debate.

The scale of the challenge is truly enormous. The heartbreaking scenes mentioned by colleagues on both sides of the House, particularly those in Aleppo, touch us all. They touch our constituents and they touch people in all parts of this country. I am pleased that several speakers have reaffirmed the important principle of the responsibility to protect, which arose from what happened in the 1990s in Rwanda and the Balkans. In the meantime, we need urgent action to secure the safe delivery of aid to all parts of Syria.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): There have been suggestions that the International Development Secretary is disinclined to allow officials to shovel money out of the door towards the year end to meet a 0.7% target if those projects are not up to scratch. She is quite right to say so, but does the hon. Gentleman agree that, given the state of need, there is no shortage of very effective ways of spending that money?

Stephen Twigg: I entirely echo what the right hon. Gentleman the former Minister says. I entirely agree. The scale of need in Syria, but also, frankly in other parts of the world, including Africa, should mean that we can both deliver the 0.7% target and do so with true efficiency and value for money.

The safe delivery of aid is clearly urgent, but as others have said, we need to move forward to some kind of political process, with a return to the ceasefire. We need to explore every option: no-fly and no-bombing zones; airdrops; and we need to look at the role that Russia is playing.

Stella Creasy: My hon. Friend is making a very powerful case for helping the people in the region. Ultimately, however, what will help them is to end the civil war in Syria. Some are saying we should wait until the presidential elections are over, but we know that the people in Aleppo do not have the luxury of waiting. Does he agree that there is absolutely a role for sanctions to get Russia back into the table and to start the process again?

Stephen Twigg: I absolutely concur with what my hon. Friend says about sanctions against Russia. I support the description of Russia’s role given by the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield in his opening speech. The Russians should hang their heads in shame for the role they are playing in Syria, and we should use every available means we have, including further sanctions, to put pressure on President Putin. This is a colossal failure of the international system. It is a stain on our humanity, and all of us must do all we can to redouble our efforts to bring peace to the people of Syria.
2.23 pm

**Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab):** Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting time for this debate. Until today, we had not debated the atrocities in Syria substantively since June, so it is thanks to the work of brave journalists at “Channel 4 News” and elsewhere, and to fearless humanitarians in Syria, that the killing and maiming of Syrian people has not passed unseen in this country despite our reces. In this House, we can make sure that the call for help from the Syrian people does not go unanswered.

Let me thank the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell). I am privileged to work with him as the co-chair of the all-party friends of Syria group. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) and the other officers and members of the all-party group for their work. I was a member of the International Development Committee when the right hon. Gentleman was the Secretary of State, and I am not ashamed to say that I took pleasure in trying to find questions he could not answer. However, today I stand united with him. He is a relentless champion for human rights and international law, and I pay tribute to him. I also thank the Foreign Secretary for attending today’s debate, alongside the International Development Secretary, who was in the Chamber earlier.

Just a few weeks ago, the fragile ceasefire in Syria was shattered in a disgraceful attack on a UN aid convoy carrying desperately needed humanitarian aid to the people of Aleppo. The brave drivers and volunteers in that convoy risked everything to help the people who need it most, and they represent the best of humanity. It is an outrage that they have paid for their decency with their lives. The peace in Syria had lasted barely a week. At the time, the ceasefire was very welcome, arising shortly after the publication of a transition plan from the opposition Syrian high negotiations committee just a few weeks earlier in London. However, through the callous targeting of civilian aid—let us be very clear that that is a war crime if it is shown to be deliberate—the Syrian regime has shown it is interested not in peace, but only in suffering. This is not the only war crime committed by Bashar al-Assad and his allies.

These are the facts. More than 400,000 people are dead. Millions have fled for their lives. Hospitals, which are supposedly protected by international law, are now attacked as a matter of routine. Some 600,000 people are still besieged in eastern Aleppo, under constant bombardment from the regime and the Russians. As we have heard, Aleppo, which is under bombardment today, is just one of about 17 besieged cities, and many neighbourhoods and entire towns have been razed to the ground. One report suggests that three quarters of children in Aleppo now suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. Anas, a little boy there, spelled out what it is like to grow up in Syria today:

“All the days are similar to each other; the only new thing is what time the shelling comes...the shelling is the thing which scares us a lot and it is not possible to get used to it.”

No child should have to live like that.

It is a fact, as a recent report from Human Rights Watch revealed, that incendiary weapons similar to napalm have been dropped on civilians in the opposition-held areas of Aleppo and Idlib. Napalm, a weapon all of us might once have thought had been consigned to the worst chapters of history, is being dropped on civilians in the 21st century.

It is also a fact, as established by the UN joint investigative mechanism in August, that the regime is using chlorine gas as a weapon by dropping barrels of it on densely populated civilian areas. This gas, when dropped in barrels from helicopters, disperses quickly and fills the lungs of people who inhale it with fluid until they choke. Such gas attacks are taking us back to the worst times of the first world war. As a result, experts are warning of the risk of normalising chemical weapons after decades of sustained international effort to keep them beyond the pale. Meanwhile, Syrians on the ground talk of hearing the sound of helicopters and praying that they are carrying just explosives and nothing worse.

It is important to be clear not just about what is happening in Syria, but about who is to blame. Clarity is necessary because confusion results in equivocation, indecision and inaction. When the Serbs were slaughtering thousands in Bosnia, international action was delayed by false claims that Bosnian Government forces had staged attacks against civilians to try to provoke an international response against Karadzic. The result was that the Major Government—to their shame, I am afraid—opposed arms sales to the Bosnians and at first resisted a no-fly zone.

The same campaign of misinformation and propaganda is being waged today. We have seen the denials and the lies about what is happening and who is to blame before, and they cannot stand. The truth is that British airstrikes are targeted at Daesh and are hundreds of miles from Aleppo, where the worst suffering is occurring. The truth is that the vast and overwhelming majority of civilian casualties in Syria are the victims of Assad’s aggression against his own people, sparked by the democratic uprising of the Arab spring.

I recognise the concerns of many about how we must think through the consequences of our actions. However, as others have said, let us be clear that it is not just when we choose to act that the consequences of our action must be accounted for, but when we have the capacity to act and choose not to. When we choose to look away, that has consequences, too.

Of course, it is natural to feel powerless in the face of such horror, but our knowledge of horror must drive us to action, not transfix us with despair. So what can be done? First, with bombs raining down on the people of eastern Aleppo as we speak, it is urgent that the ceasefire be salvaged, if at all possible. If it is not possible, there are still actions that the UK can take. We should volunteer to take the lead in tracking aircraft over Syria, using our assets based in the region. There must be absolute clarity about who is responsible for these crimes, not just in the hope that the aggressors will change their tactics, but to keep alive the possibility of prosecutions. We have Type 45 destroyers and monitoring aircraft off the coast that could do that job and make a difference.

Speaking of accountability, I hope that there is now consensus in this House that we can support the French initiative to send Syria and Russia to the International Criminal Court, and the strongest possible sanctions against Russia to show that there are consequences for
what it is doing. The Foreign Secretary has said this before and I agree with him: we have to be at the forefront of applying sanctions.

In the longer term, the protection of civilians from aerial bombardment, along with the destruction of chemical weapons stockpiles, must be the aim. There is a legal precedent in Kosovo for the establishment of a no-fly zone without Security Council backing. My view is that that must not be off the table if it can be shown to be the most effective way of protecting civilians.

Sir Desmond Swayne: We must be absolutely clear as a House precisely what we mean by this demand for a no-fly zone. The right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) pointed out how that worked in Iraq, where we had to take down Iraqi planes. This would require the will to take down Russian planes. Perhaps that is the right answer, but we must be aware of what we are contemplating.

Alison McGovern: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He anticipates the very point I am about to make.

Given that barrel bombs and chemical weapons are mainly delivered by helicopter, experts have calculated that a no-fly zone just for helicopters could reduce civilian casualties by up to 90%. Even failing that, there are things that we could do. We can push for bigger windows to get humanitarian aid into the worst-hit areas and look at using other assets to drop aid into besieged areas. We can also get more support to the heroic White Helmets, the Syrian volunteers who risk their lives to save as many people as they can from the death raining down on them. Many people will have seen the White Helmets in the news in recent weeks because of their nomination for the Nobel peace prize. These heroes risk it all every day to save lives, often running towards the sound of the shelling and risking being caught in second strikes. They need our support. Even if the only result of this debate is that all those people watching make a donation, it will have been worth it.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend be clear about what support she is seeking for the White Helmets? Are we talking about greater access to technical help and advice from doctors over the internet during surgery, increased donations or sending medical equipment—I am unclear?

Alison McGovern: All of the above.

Emily Thornberry: I just want to make sure that the record is absolutely accurate. The difficulty with taking Syria or Russia to the ICC, as things stand, is that they are not members. The French initiative is to try to get an International Criminal Court prosecutor to set up a way of prosecuting. That we certainly support.

Alison McGovern: I thank my Front-Bench colleague for that clarity.

Finally, we can certainly offer support to the credible, inclusive plans the Syrian opposition are putting forward.
I hope that the Foreign Secretary can give us some reassurances. The task ahead is not an easy one, but I hope he understands from the tenor of debate in this Chamber and from all the positive contributions he has heard that the resolve is there, that there is the will to do the right thing and that, as a country and as individual representatives, we need to be counted.

2.42 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): It has been a privilege to be in the House today for some of the best—although I also have to say some of the worst—traditions of where our democracy is at the moment. I will say briefly that there is no one better to seek to step into the shoes of our dearly missed friend, Jo Cox, than my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern). We will all do our best.

I want to dwell for a little longer on what happened on 19 September. It is no mean feat to put together a cross-line convoy. Some 31 lorries had been assembled by various nations under the clear banner of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. I will read from a couple of eye witnesses. One said:

“The bombardment was continuous, continuous.”

Someone else said:

“I saw the bodies of men on the ground...I was told they were truck drivers and volunteers who had been unloading...medicine, food and other desperately needed items”—

desperately needed by the people of Aleppo.

That bombing went on for more than two hours. It came from helicopters and land forces, and started immediately after a Russian drone that had been directly overhead disappeared. There is no doubt as to who was the perpetrator of this grotesque war crime. It was President Putin of Russia. He was sticking two fingers up to the United Nations and the international community of which he still has the audacity to claim he is a working part.

I have to say this: shame on anyone, from the UN official report to Members of this House to members of my party, who fails to acknowledge that grotesque war crime. I hear the platitudes about bread, not bombs, but the bombs are destroying the bread, and when the people who are making the platitudes are obstructing the possibility of any peace in the region I say that they are directly complicit in what is happening. It is time for us to choose—as individuals in this Parliament and as a country—which side we are on. Do we want to act or to stand by?

Last week I was in Istanbul, where I met the leadership of the Syrian opposition coalition in its headquarters. Those people are of course exiled from their country, where they still have families. Members of their communities live in fear of their lives there and their lives are taken every day. I met the president and the secretary-general, a man called Abdelleh Fahed. He does not speak English, so spoke to me through an interpreter. He looked at me with cold and cynical fury in his eyes, and said, “We are grateful for the sugar that is sent to us from the international community and is bombed by the Russians. We hope you send more sugar that will be bombed. But actually this is not primarily a problem of a lack of aid being sent. It is that the aid is being bombed by the regime and by Russia, and until you
help us with tackling that at source no amount of goodwill and humanitarian handwringing is going to help to solve this situation.”

There are different interpretations of what a no-fly zone or a no-bombing zone would mean. I recognise the grave danger of escalation in saying that we would be prepared to shoot down a Russian plane. I will say two things. My sense—and I would like to hear the Foreign Secretary’s initial views on this—is that a no-bombing zone could work. We could say that every time the Assad regime and Russia committed one of these atrocities in the full view of the international community, the coalition that is currently fighting Daesh would respond, primarily with naval assets, by targeting part of the regime’s infrastructure. No one would be bombing Russia or taking down Russian planes, but we would target that infrastructure every time they committed an atrocity. Each time they killed civilians we would respond, targeting only the military.

The Foreign Secretary knows his history. We could also say that he knows a thing or two about bullies. President Putin is a classic bully. Over the past few years, and in fact beyond that, the international community has cowered every time he has advanced. When you do that with bullies, they go further and further. I say to the people who say every time that we must not do something because we will enrage Russia and we do not want another world war, that their cowardice is making conflict more likely, both the continuation of conflict in Syria and the possibility of further conflict in Europe. The only thing to do with bullies is stand up to them.

We are going to have to do that, sooner or later. I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy). The people of Syria do not have three months to see how the presidential handover goes and what the new president is like; they are being killed in their hundreds every single day.

Angela Smith: Will my hon. Friend give way?

John Woodcock: Okay, really quickly—we are getting frowned at by Mr Speaker.

Angela Smith: I will be very quick. Does my hon. Friend agree that the suggestion from the Labour Front-Bench spokesperson that we go through a different process, which involves engaging with the Syrians at various levels, will not work, because we have no time whatever, as Aleppo will have disappeared by Christmas?

John Woodcock: Who are we kidding? There is no process, because no one is standing up to the Russian regime’s bombs. People understand that, but they do not want to get involved. The question is ultimately for the Foreign Secretary and the Government, because my party is making itself more and more of an irrelevance with every pronouncement from the Front Bench. Are we prepared, as the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) said at the beginning, to oversee another Guernica or a collapse of the UN, like the League of Nations before it? Are we going to be the top priority.

We are in immediate danger of death. Addressing that must be the top priority.

I sometimes think that it is like four different fire engines turning up to a fire and spending time arguing about whose fault the fire is, while in the building the children are screaming for somebody, anybody, for God’s sake to put out the fire. When the emergency services turn out to a suspicious fire, the priorities are to get people out, extinguish the fire and then investigate whether it was caused by a criminal act, and then, if necessary and appropriate, to take action against those responsible. A lot of matters that have been raised in the debate are important, but we can never lose sight of the fact that, if we spend another three weeks looking for a negotiated settlement, it will be another three weeks of children being killed in the raids, starving to death or dying from basic simple illnesses because they cannot get the treatment they so desperately need and absolutely deserve.

There are probably 35 doctors left in Aleppo. They cannot possibly cope with the demands being placed on them. Each and every one of them risks their life every day. We know they are being targeted. I cannot imagine a situation where being a doctor or a nurse meant risking life every day to go to work. That is what those people are doing—heroes each and every one of them. We know that the largest hospital in the city was hit seven times in a single morning. That was not an accident or a navigational error; it was a deliberate war crime. When the time comes, it should be treated as such. Just to make the point, they went back and bombed it again the next day. It is a deliberate tactic by the Syrians and the Russians to attack civilian targets on one day, wait for the emergency services to respond, and then go in and target them again.

We also need to re-evaluate the part the UK is playing. We need to go back to the reasons why the United Kingdom got involved in military action and reassess whether it is still appropriate. The former Prime Minister, in arguing in favour of military action, described the Brimstone missile as a “unique asset that no other coalition ally can contribute”.—[Official Report, 26 September 2016; Vol. 585, c. 1262.]

That unique asset was deployed by the United Kingdom nine times in the seven months between February and August. It was used more than that in January and December last year, but it does not seem to me like a compelling argument for continued military action.
We were also told that there were likely to be 70,000 moderate troops ready to join the struggle against Daesh—one requirement for a just war is a reasonable chance of success. I hope the Foreign Secretary can tell us where those 70,000 moderate troops are and whether they still exist. If they do not, how many are there?

The former Prime Minister expected and hoped that, if we supported military action, we would have a transitional Government in Syria in about six months. Those six months passed in June. Will the Foreign Secretary tell us how far away we are now? Are we within six months or, as my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) said, are we further from a peaceful solution than we have ever been? We must face up to those difficult questions. On this occasion, I am asking not because I want to trip up those on the Government Benches. I am asking from the heart. Please can we look to ensure that the part we are playing, whether through military action or anything else, contributes to the solution rather than makes the problem so much more worse?

Can any of us really imagine what 12 million refugees look like? A great many are refugees in their own country, and millions of them are scattered across the globe. I for one would welcome many more if only we were allowed to do so. Nine million of those refugees are women and children who have played no part in any war or any crime. They are utterly innocent. Thirteen thousand children have lost their lives. Are we going to allow that to get to 14,000, 15,000 and 16,000, or are we going to accept, ultimately, that the first priority is to save the lives of those who are left to prevent those appalling statistics from getting any worse?

I am a great fan of the Scots-Australian singer-songwriter Eric Bogle. I did not get his permission to quote his song, but I hope he will not mind the breach of copyright. Many years ago, in response to another conflict, he wrote:

“And have you seen the madmen who strut the world’s stage
Threatening our destruction as they prance and preen and rage?
Rattling nuclear sabres as humanity holds its breath
Feeding on fear and bigotry as the children starve to death”.

The children are starving to death today. Our first priority must be to feed the children by whatever means needed, and then we can deal with the rest of the mess that the Russians, the Syrians and Daesh have created.

2.56 pm

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Perhaps I am one of those men who prance and prance in the way the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) described, but I regret strongly the fact that when the House had the opportunity three years ago to leave open the option of military action it chose not to do so. I felt that leaving the option open was the appropriate thing to do at the time, but a majority of Members of the House felt that it was not.

I am pleased that we have the debate today—I congratulate the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) on securing it—because it enables the Government to give us a quarterly update on Syria. Notwithstanding what is happening on the other side of the channel with Brexit, the House wants regular updates from the Government on progress in Syria. I look forward therefore to the Foreign Secretary giving greater clarity on what discussions the UK Government have had with the other players in the peace process, and on what role we have been playing to try to promote peace in Syria.

I welcome the role the UK Government have played in sanctions on Russia and hope that it will continue when the UK leaves the EU—the UK has played a prominent role in the EU in relation to Ukraine. In passing, I hope the Government look more carefully at sanctions in relation to Magnitsky and the Russians’ responsibility for that.

The Foreign Secretary drew attention to his view that the Russians may have committed war crimes and spoke specifically of the double tap manoeuvre, which I understand to mean that a strike takes place, there is a gap to allow the emergency services to turn up, and the site is hit again. I hope he sets out precisely what evidence he has for that, because it is clearly a very serious allegation. I want to draw his attention to the fact that, in Yemen, the Saudis are alleged to have used the same double tap manoeuvre. If rightly he expresses concerns about war crimes committed by Russia in Syria, I hope he will consider whether the Saudis’ use of that manoeuvre in Yemen also amounts to a war crime.

A lot of Members have contributed positively on the issue of recording information about where Russian planes and Assad’s helicopters have been active. I hope that that information is being recorded, because we will want evidence if there are war crimes prosecutions at some point in the future. I hope that when the Foreign Secretary responds he will be able to say something about whether the UK is considering using our universal jurisdiction to bring the Russians to account if there are no other means for doing so. Given that the Russians are engaging in a propaganda war—we have seen the activities of some of its news outlets here in the UK—I wonder whether there is no military reason why we could not put online the flight paths of every Russian plane, with an identifier on it, so that people can go online and make a clear connection between that flight and a bomb. I put that suggestion to him and I hope the Government will consider it.

We are in favour of transparency. The Foreign Secretary will be aware of the joint policy for the military coalition to investigate civilian casualties. I do not think that that has yet reported. I hope it will come forward, so we can see that we are dealing effectively with any casualties that might have been caused by the coalition.

On air drops, I quoted the parliamentary answer from the Minister of State, Department for International Development, the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), and I will do so again:

“The use of air drops to deliver aid is high risk and should only be considered as a last resort when all other means have failed”. It seems to me that all other means have failed. The first half of that has been satisfied. The second half is that airdrops require certain conditions to be met for a successful delivery. It may be on that basis that that is being rejected, but the possibility of air drops must be actively pursued by the Government.

On the reporting of what is happening in Syria, I draw Members’ attention to the case of Zaina Erhaim, an award-winning Syrian journalist who had her passport removed by the British Government when she arrived in
the UK. Apparently, the Syrians reported that her passport had been stolen. Given that we think Syria is a pariah state committing crimes against humanity, the fact that we would act on a request from it to seize someone’s passport is bizarre. I hope the Foreign Secretary can explain why that action was taken.

The international community and the UK Parliament failed Syria three years ago. Today, we must give the Government the strongest steer possible that they must act to stop the murderous activities of Russia and Syria. If we are back here in three years debating Syria again, it will be to pick over the skeleton of a country destroyed, flattened and obliterated, with its people scattered to all four corners of the world.

3.2 pm

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) on securing this important debate. My party, Plaid Cymru, like others believes that the perpetrators of repeated attacks—the bombing of civilians, hospitals and the aid convoy on 19 September—should be brought before the International Criminal Court. I will be brief and limit my remarks to this one specific point. In his response, I ask the Foreign Secretary to inform the House of the Government’s stance on this matter.

Others have been quite clear. On Sunday, the Socialist President of France, François Hollande, said that “these...are the victims of war crimes. Those that commit these acts will have to face up to their responsibility, including in the ICC”.

On Monday, France’s Foreign Minister, Jean-Marc Ayrault, called on the International Criminal Court to investigate Russia for possible war crimes in Syria. He told French radio:

“France intends to get in touch with the prosecutor to find out how the probe can be launched.”

That was referred to earlier in this debate. This followed calls on Friday by the US Secretary of State John Kerry for Russia and Syria to face a war crimes investigation for their attacks on civilians. The case against them is clear and is backed up by firm evidence. I do not need to elaborate on that today.

My party opposed the bombing of Syria by the UK. We were told that such bombing would be carefully controlled to exclude danger to civilians. Russia and Assad’s Syrian regime take no such precautions. Indeed, the evidence is that they target civilians. They should answer for that before the International Criminal Court.

I realise that there are substantial difficulties. The Rome Statute, which established the Court, has been ratified by 123 countries. The United States, Russia and Syria have not done so. I understand, however, that a case could be made to the ICC through a UN referral. I think that that is what the French Government have in mind.

The Security Council has been deadlocked over Syria. Russia vetoed a French resolution in May 2014 to refer the situation in Syria to the ICC. On Saturday, Russia again vetoed a UN resolution, drafted by France, demanding an immediate end to the bombing campaign. A rival measure put forward by Russia, which called for a ceasefire, made no mention of a halt to airstrikes. This was also rejected, blocked by the United Kingdom and the United States.

The UN Special Envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, has said prior to the meeting of the UN Security Council that if urgent action is not taken to address the situation, thousands of Syrians would be killed and towns, such as eastern Aleppo, could be totally destroyed by the end of the year. The need for action, therefore, is pressing and the UK has the power and the influence to act. I believe the Government should use that power and influence ever more effectively, as others do, to put even more pressure on Russia in particular. It was confirmed this morning that President Putin will not visit Paris next week, after declining to meet François Hollande for talks on Syria.

I do not need to say that the situation is desperate, but both the Assad regime and Russia are accused, rightly, of perpetrating war crimes. We uphold international law. There are mechanisms for bringing perpetrators of war crimes before the ICC. On what possible basis might we not do this? Rather, we should do as our European partners do as well as fulfilling our duties as a permanent member of the Security Council. We believe that bringing such a case before the ICC would only increase its credibility. The ICC has been seen as weak, and strong countries are not signed up to it. It has been criticised, particularly by the African Union, for its focus on Africa—it has brought charges only against black Africans. We believe the ICC’s credibility can only be enhanced by such a case.

3.7 pm

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): I apologise to the House for my lateness in attending the debate; I was chairing the Environmental Audit Committee.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) on securing the debate and my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) on her passionate and heartfelt speech. I echo her sentiments about how much we miss the good point I thought it best to turn off the geo-location from tweeting a lot of photos from the camps and at that point I thought it best to turn off the geo-location from the Twitter account and not do any tweeting until we got back to our safe haven of Beirut. I must admit that I felt like a bit of a coward doing that.

What we know about Syria is that 400,000 people have been killed in this humanitarian catastrophe, 5 million Syrian refugees have fled their country and 8 million more are displaced within its own borders. They are fleeing the terror of Assad, ISIL and now Russia. I met a woman called Hadia who told me how her husband was killed in Homs while working as a Red Cross volunteer. The UN had offered to take her and her children to Germany, but she declined because her
mother was unable to accompany them. Four of her adult children are still trapped in Homs. Cases like Hadia’s demonstrate the terrible choices refugees face: you lose your husband, you bring your mother with you and then you are forced to leave your mother behind in order to seek safety for your children.

I also met a man who had a pacemaker fitted in Damascus and who, upon his return to Lebanon, was deregistered as a refugee because he had left freely and returned. This left him and his wife destitute. He was 65 years old and unable to work. He was destitute, lying on his back in a camp.

The vulnerability of those refugees in the Beka’a valley and elsewhere in Lebanon is growing, as we heard in the speech from my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg). Their food allocation has been cut. They are on pretty much starvation rations, capped at five family members. I met 10-year-old girls labouring for seven hours a day in the fields, earning $4 a day and working one hour a day just to pay the rent for their family to pitch a little ragged tent on a disused onion factory. Those children’s childhoods have been stolen. Eight million people have been displaced internally in Syria, having suffered attacks from cluster munitions and chemical weapons, and the collective punishment of siege warfare.

At the last meeting of the all-party group on Syria that I attended with the then hon. Member for Batley and Spen, Jo Cox, we heard about 60,000 people disappearing and their families paying extortionate sums of money for news of their loved ones or just to receive their bodies for burial. We are seeing Assad carry out the extermination of his people. He has destroyed his country. He has destroyed one of the oldest civilisations in the world. He has destroyed the economy and destroyed all good will in that country. It is now a wartime economy, based on looting, corruption, arms and people smuggling. People are living under siege, their access to basic services denied. Eleven per cent of Syria’s population—2 million people—have been wounded or injured, and we have seen the terrible suffering of Syria’s children.

In August 2013, this House voted against military action in Syria. I shared the regret of many on our side of the House and of the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) at our cowardice on that occasion. We are now living with the consequences of that inaction. That vote was prompted by a sarin gas attack on civilians in eastern Damascus that killed 1,400 people, 426 of whom were children. The UN doctrine of the responsibility to protect allows military intervention to protect civilians from genocide and war crimes by their state and provides a valid legal basis for intervention. That responsibility to protect weighs upon us as heavily today as it did on that August day in 2013, when, after the vote, we went home, turned on our televisions and saw that Assad had carried out a napalm attack on a school. Using chemical weapons on sleeping children is a war crime. We know all the reasons for that vote, but we now know that we have to protect civilians from Assad and, now, from Russian intervention as well.

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that what the Russians are doing now to Aleppo is exactly what they did to Grozny? We need to learn the lessons from that.

Mary Creagh: Absolutely. The Russian war crimes in Grozny were bravely documented by Anna Politkovskaya and another woman journalist whose name escapes me, both of whom were assassinated by the Russian regime. Of course, truth is the first casualty of war, but we do not have the fog of war to hide behind in this case. People in Aleppo are tweeting their situation and their circumstances.

We heard from the Secretary of State for Defence yesterday about how Daesh have used the conflict in Syria to recruit jihadi fighters from all over the world and to spread their terror across to Iraq. We know that the airstrikes that we are carrying out against them in Iraq and Syria, backed by a coalition of 67 countries, are slowly pushing them back in Iraq, but they will never be defeated in Syria until this conflict is sorted.

Tom Tugendhat: The hon. Lady is making some very powerful points. This is a fight not only for the people and the children of Aleppo—a point made so powerfully by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell)—but very much for ourselves: the international order we all rely on, the migrant crisis we all see and the expansion of Russia we all feel. NATO, the west and the UK demand action.

Mary Creagh: I agree totally with the hon. Gentleman. Russia’s positioning of nuclear-capable warheads in Kaliningrad is another example of its aggression towards NATO countries.

A war that we wished was none of our business is our business. Syrian children have drowned in our seas and millions of Syrians have turned up in our continent seeking shelter. I am pleased that Wakefield has offered to take 100 Syrian refugees. We are a city of sanctuary and we look forward to welcoming them among us. These are people like us. They had cars, apartments, solar panels and satellite TV, but were forced to flee bombs, napalm, sarin gas and cluster munitions from a Government who target schools and hospitals—a Government who are aided and abetted by Russia, whose sole aim is to preserve access to the Mediterranean through its port at Tartus in Syria. Russia attacked the first humanitarian aid convoy to enter Aleppo for weeks, destroying lorries filled with baby milk and anti-lice medication.

I want to hear more from the Foreign Secretary about what plans he has for further sanctions against Russia, but we cannot claim ignorance or hide behind the fog of war. Washing our hands like Pontius Pilate and choosing not to act is no strategy at all. I was too scared to tweet from the Syrian border, but brave people in Syria are tweeting their lives and filming the deaths of others as they happen. Omar Ibrahim is a neurosurgeon, removing bomb fragments from the brains of children on the floor of a destroyed hospital, and one of 30 doctors left in eastern Aleppo. Bana Alabed, a seven-year-old girl from eastern Aleppo, tweeted last week. She wanted to live like the children of London: “No bombing!” It is not too late for us to save Omar and Bana. They are relying on us. We need to do what we should have done in 2013. We need a no-fly zone over the city of Aleppo and the skies of Syria. Omar and Bana are watching. We must not let them down again.
3.16 pm

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): May I thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting the time for the debate this afternoon? May I also join colleagues from across the House in congratulating the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) on securing today’s debate?

There is, as we have heard, an unimaginable humanitarian disaster happening right now across Syria, and nowhere more than in the largest city, Aleppo. As we have heard, 400,000 people have already been killed, 15,000 of them children, with in excess of 1 million people wounded since the onset of the war in 2011. As a result of the war, 5 million Syrians have been displaced and have had to flee the country. Five million people is equivalent to the entire population of Scotland, displaced, homeless and impoverished.

If I may, I would like to pay tribute to the people of my constituency of Argyll and Bute, who, with the full support of Argyll and Bute Council, the Scottish Government and the Argyll community housing association, have responded magnificently and have warmly welcomed 15 Syrian families to the gorgeous island of Bute, with more scheduled to arrive in the not-too-distant future. I have met the Syrian families and enjoyed their kind hospitality. I am delighted to report that they are settling in well and are being supported by a thoughtful and generous local community. I am sure this House would like to put on record its appreciation for the welcome shown by the people of Bute to the innocent men, women and children of Syria in their hour of greatest need.

Like the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), Bute has shown what we can do. I sincerely hope that we in the United Kingdom can accommodate far more Syrian families—not just in Argyll and Bute or in Scotland, but across the UK. However, those few families on Bute are the very lucky ones, because they managed to escape the hell on earth that their country has become. Although many of the people I met were born and bred in Aleppo, I doubt very much whether they would recognise it today, as just last week the UN envoy to Syria said that he feared that the eastern part of the city could be totally destroyed within two months.

This claim follows on from the bombing of Syria’s largest hospital, which was hit by seven airstrikes on the morning of 1 October. Then, as the repairs started, it was hit again the following day. As we have heard, in a shocking attack—undoubtedly a war crime—a UN aid convoy was deliberately targeted, killing 20 people. The World Health Organisation said that in the week to 30 September, at least 338 Aleppo residents, including 106 children, were killed.

There is overwhelming evidence that the Assad regime and his Russian allies are now deliberately targeting civilians, hospitals and the emergency medical teams and first responders. As the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) said, the regime, with its allies, stands accused of using a method known as two-tap strikes, in which they bomb an area, circle round, giving sufficient time for medical responders to attend, and then return to bomb the rescuers. If that is true, it is a despicably cynical tactic that, even amid the horror of this conflict, leaves one speechless at its depravity.

Today, in eastern Aleppo, a city officially under siege, there are only 35 doctors to care for a quarter of a million residents. It is the biggest besieged area by far. People still ask, “What can we do, when there is so much chaos on the ground and in the skies above Syria?” I would say to the Government that, as protagonists in the conflict, it is absolutely incumbent on the United Kingdom to be part of the solution. The Government must produce a coherent plan and a sensible strategy immediately to halt the airstrike campaign in which the UK is involved. The Foreign Secretary said on 19 August:

“It is only when the fighting and bombing stops that we can hope to deliver the political solution.”

I say to the Foreign Secretary that that means everyone’s bombs, including our own.

Andy Baker of Oxfam has said:

“It’s not only Russia, it is other nations, too, Britain among them, that have fuelled the fire of this conflict, continuing to support one side or another and failing to deliver peace.”

The Foreign Secretary and Oxfam are right: adding UK jets and bombs to this prolonged and agonising war has not and will not bring about a lasting peace.

Sammy Wilson: Is the hon. Gentleman suggesting that the UK should unilaterally stop its actions in Syria? If so, how does he think Russia and Assad would react to such a withdrawal?

Brendan O’Hara: The United Kingdom unilaterally joined this fight in December last year, promising that it would be a pivotal turning-point in the campaign. It has singularly failed to do so, so we have to take a different tack. We must have the bravery and the courage to stand up and say that we were wrong to do what we did last year. As I say, we have to take a different tack.

Almost exactly a year ago, we asked the Government a series of questions, none of which was answered in the headlong rush to join this conflict, so I ask again: how, when more than a dozen different countries are engaged in military action, have UK airstrikes brought peace and stability closer to Syria? Where is the UK Government’s detailed plan for winning and securing the peace? Where is the money for the reconstruction of Syria going to come from when the bombing ends?

We need to act, and act decisively with our allies and friends. As the French Foreign Minister, Jean-Marc Ayrault, said last week,

“If we don’t do something, Aleppo will soon just be in ruins and will remain in history as a town in which the inhabitants were abandoned to their executioners.”

3.22 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I, too, thank the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) for bringing forward this debate, and I thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting it. As I rise to speak today, I am mindful that it is little under a year since the vote on whether the UK should join the US-led coalition airstrikes against Daesh in Syria. SNP Members did not support the military action, and any case for airstrikes that the Government believed to exist has now completely fallen apart.

There is a very clear need for a revised military strategy. It is needed urgently, and it must not ignore the extreme humanitarian situation in the country. When the former Prime Minister addressed the House on 26 November last year, he said:
The humanitarian crisis in Syria just continues to get worse. More than 400,000 people have already been killed since 2011. The UN estimates that more than half the country’s pre-war population of 23 million is in urgent need of humanitarian aid. Millions of people have been displaced: 4 million are living as refugees outside Syria, and at least 8 million more are displaced inside the country. Amnesty International estimates that for every hour of the conflict, 50 families have been uprooted from their homes in Syria. Humanitarian aid is being blocked by the Assad regime from getting to those who need it. Hospitals are being systematically targeted by Assad and Russian forces is beyond comprehension. Hospitals are being systematically targeted by Assad and Russian forces is beyond comprehension. Hospitals are being systematically targeted by Assad and Russian forces is beyond comprehension.

According to the Syria Campaign, more than 100,000 children are being bombed in Aleppo, while figures from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights place the total number of children killed in the conflict at over 13,000. Since the ceasefire collapsed fewer than three weeks ago, more than 100 children have been killed out of a total of around 600 civilians. Please stop to think about that—it is the equivalent of a primary school class being slaughtered every five days.

The humanitarian cries of Syria just continues to get worse. More than 400,000 people have already been killed since 2011. The UN estimates that more than half the country’s pre-war population of 23 million is in urgent need of humanitarian aid. Millions of people have been displaced: 4 million are living as refugees outside Syria, and at least 8 million more are displaced inside the country. Amnesty International estimates that for every hour of the conflict, 50 families have been uprooted from their homes in Syria. Humanitarian aid is being blocked by the Assad regime from getting to those who need it. Hospitals are being systematically targeted by Assad and Russia, while an estimated 382 medical facilities have been destroyed.

Michael Gove (Surrey Heath) (Con): The hon. Lady is understandably painting a heart-rending picture of what is happening in Syria. It seems to me, having listened to two speeches, that the SNP’s position is to equate our military intervention with that of Vladimir Putin, and to argue that we should step aside from this carnage and hope that a unilateral act of disarmament on our part will somehow instil in Bashar al-Assad a spirit of generosity towards his own people that he has not yet shown. Does the hon. Lady not realise how absurd the SNP’s position is? Does she not recognise that it is only through both military engagement and humanitarian work that we will be able to bring relief to the suffering people of that country?

Mr Speaker: That is the gravamen of the point, for which we are grateful.

Margaret Ferrier: The right hon. Gentleman misses the fact that we are not denying that the brutality inflicted by Assad and Russian forces is beyond comprehension. However, the role that we can and should play is a humanitarian and diplomatic one. That, I believe, should be our role.

In an utterly shocking attack—one that possibly amounts to a war crime—a UN aid convoy was struck in an airstrike, which killed at least 20 people. The reality is that there is utter chaos on the ground and in the skies over Syria. Just last month, the MOD confirmed that the UK was involved in airstrikes that killed at least 62 Syrian Government troops. We have become part of the chaos.

Other Members have mentioned the work of the White Helmets, which I want to mention, too. They have saved thousands of lives, and continue to do so on a daily basis. They were recently nominated for the Nobel peace prize. As the bombs rain down, the White Helmets do not stop. They rush in to save civilians. They are the heroes in this conflict.

The UK Government need immediately to halt their airstrikes in Syria, and present Parliament with an alternative coherent plan. We need a sensible strategy—one that actually ensures that the humanitarian situation is not cast aside. We can make a difference in this conflict. We can play some part, no matter how small, in minimising the human suffering in this horrific war. However, it is time for the Government to admit that doing so will require a complete change of strategy.

3.28 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) on securing this valuable debate and commend him for the power of his speech. I also thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting the debate. We have heard speeches or interventions from 43 right hon. and hon. Members, and I think that every one has made clear the horror of the House at the suffering being endured by the people of Aleppo, where rebel-held districts have come under furious attack from the Assad regime and from Russia, with the help of Iranian-backed militias.

Let me spell out some of the consequences. At this moment, the 275,000 inhabitants of eastern Aleppo are under siege. They are isolated from the outside world, subjected to constant bombardment, and prevented from receiving humanitarian aid. Their power and water supplies have been cut off in what has become a signature tactic of the Assad killing machine: the besieging of civilian populations. What we are now seeing in eastern Aleppo is the biggest and, potentially, the deadliest siege since the outbreak of Syria’s civil war more than five years ago.

Last week the United Nations special envoy for Syria, Staffan de Mistura, warned that eastern Aleppo might be “totally destroyed” by the end of the year. In the past two weeks, at least 376 people—half of them children—have been killed, and another 1,266 have been injured. Every hospital in eastern Aleppo is believed to have been bombed, some more than once, and several have been put out of action. Hospitals have been targeted with such frequency and precision that it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that this must be deliberate policy. As the House will know, intentionally attacking a hospital amounts to a war crime.

It is time, I think, for all these incidents to be properly and fully investigated with a view to assembling the necessary evidence and ensuring that justice is done—and, yes, I say in answer to questions that have been raised by several Members today that we do think that there could be advantage in the procedures of the International Criminal Court. I remind the House that in recent history, war criminals have been successfully prosecuted decades after their offences.
Sir Nicholas Soames: Does my right hon. Friend agree that this catastrophe represents a terrible failure of the security order that protects our very civilisation, and that if these prosecutions are not made, a terrible, terrible failure will be laid at our door?

Boris Johnson: I certainly agree with my right hon. Friend that we are all judged in the House by our actions and our resolve. I think it was my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield who spoke of the will of the House. I am afraid that that was absent three years ago when, as several Members pointed out, we took an historic decision not to intervene. I hope that we will show a different measure of resolve this afternoon. Those who are conducting this bombing and who are, in my view, culpable of these crimes should realise that the mills of justice grind slowly, but they grind small.

The same penalties should apply to those involved in deliberate attacks on humanitarian convoys. As many Members have pointed out, on 19 September a UN aid convoy was destroyed near Aleppo and at least 20 people were killed. The vehicles were clearly marked, and the convoy had official permission from the Assad regime to deliver those desperately needed supplies. Satellite photographs that are in the public domain leave no doubt that the convoy was struck from the air. The incident took place after dark; by Russia’s own account, the war planes of Syria’s regime cannot strike targets after dark, and—also by Russia’s own account—its aircraft were in the vicinity at the time. All the available evidence therefore points to Russian responsibility for the atrocity.

I trust that the UN board of inquiry will establish exactly what happened, and we in the United Kingdom Government stand ready to help. I emphasise that it is the UK which, week after week, is taking the lead—together with our allies in America and France, and all like-minded nations—in highlighting what is happening in Syria to a world in which, I fear, the wells of outrage are becoming dry. It is up to us in the Government to show a lead, and to pursue.

I listened to the passionate speeches from the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) and the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern), the co-chair of the all-party friends of Syria group, who is carrying on the tradition of Jo Cox, whom we mourn. I listened to all the speeches that made the point that there is no commensurate horror among some of the anti-war protest groups, and I agree with the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley: I would certainly like to see demonstrations outside the Russian embassy. Where is the Stop the War coalition at the moment?

It is up to us in the Government to show a lead, and week after week in the UN we are indeed doing what we can to point out what the Russians are up to and to build an international understanding of what is going on in Syria. I believe that we are having some effect. As Members have pointed out, the Russians have now been driven to mount a veto in the Security Council to protect their own position five times. This is not some anti-Russian campaign; we are not doing this out of any particular hostility towards Russia. Indeed, the US Secretary of State, John Kerry, did his utmost to negotiate an agreement with his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, that would at least have reduced the killing. Anyone who has studied the Lavrov-Kerry talks will know that John Kerry threw himself into that task in a Herculean way. However, on 3 October, he was driven to abandon his efforts by the attack on the aid convoy and the pounding of Aleppo, which destroyed all hopes of a ceasefire. The US Secretary of State has concluded, I think rightly, that Russia was determined to help Assad’s onslaught against the women, children and families of Aleppo regardless of any agreement.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): Will the Foreign Secretary take this opportunity to tell the House whether he supports the French proposal that, in the case of war crimes and crimes against humanity, the five permanent members of the UN Security Council should voluntarily undertake to give up their veto in order to enable the Security Council to take action when these heinous crimes are being committed, as is clearly the case in Aleppo at the moment?

Boris Johnson: We are in constant touch with our French colleagues about this proposal. As I said earlier, I am personally very attracted to the idea of holding these people to account before the International Criminal Court, so that is certainly something that I would like to pursue.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Does the Foreign Secretary not think that more weight would be attached to the strength of his words about the International Criminal Court if the regime of President al-Bashir of Sudan—who has also been bombing his people from the air, who has recently been seen to be using chemical weapons against them, and who has been indicted by the International Criminal Court for genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity—was not now being embraced by the UK Government through the UK-Sudan strategic dialogue as a partner in countering terrorism and managing migration?

Boris Johnson: I take that point very sincerely, but it is vital that we concentrate our efforts and our censure on the Russians and on the Assad regime, who are primarily responsible for what is going on in Syria now.

We can get lost endlessly in all sorts of moral equivalences, and I heard a few earlier from the Scottish National party, but it is vital that we focus on what is happening in Syria. That is the question before us this afternoon.

I must say bluntly to the House that if Russia continues on its current path, that great country is in danger of becoming a pariah nation. If President Putin’s strategy is to restore the greatness and glory of Russia, I believe that he risks seeing his ambition turn to ashes in the face of international contempt for what is happening in Syria. Russia tries to justify its onslaught on Aleppo by saying that its sole aim is to drive out Jabhat al-Nusra, or Fatah al-Sham as it now calls itself, which is the Syrian branch of al-Qaeda. No one questions that these people are terrorists, but their presence in that city cannot justify an assault on 275,000 innocent people, still less the imposition of a siege, which is, by its very nature, a wholly indiscriminate tactic. I agree with the phrase of Staffan de Mistura who said that the Russians should not be able to use the presence of Jabhat al-Nusra as an alibi.

Emily Thornberry: The right hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech. I wonder whether he will go further in relation to Staffan de Mistura. Is he in a position to
say today that the British Government will support Staffan de Mistura’s initiative to escort the jihadi fighters out of eastern Aleppo so that the Russians no longer have an excuse to bomb that section of the city?

Boris Johnson: I will come to the way forward for Aleppo in a minute. Let me remind the House of all the ways in which the UK is trying to be of use and trying to save the situation. Like other Members, I pay tribute to the White Helmets, who rescue men, women and children from the rubble of bomb sites. Many Members have met them. Funded partly by the UK Government, they are doing an heroic job. Of the 3,000 volunteers, 142 have been killed in the line of duty and 400 have been wounded.

Britain is at the forefront of this humanitarian response to the Syrian crisis. We have pledged £2.3 billion—our largest ever response to a single humanitarian crisis—which makes us the second largest donor after the US. We can be proud in this country of the help that we are giving to hundreds of thousands of people. Britain has done a huge amount to mobilise the international community. I pay tribute to my hon. and right hon. Friends on the Front Bench for their work in that regard. In February, we co-hosted a conference and secured pledges of more than $12 billion, which is the largest amount ever raised in a one-day conference:

Let me answer the question about whether we are taking enough refugees asked by the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg). Yes, of course we should take our share, and we are doing so, but Members will agree that the overwhelming priority is to help those nearest the centres of conflict in the berm and elsewhere and to keep them as near to their communities as we can.

Let me turn to the questions that were raised by the hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) and repeatedly by other Members. Many have expressed the view strongly that they want this country to go further. Others have spoken about no-fly zones, or no-bombing zones. I have every sympathy with those ideas and the motives behind them. We must work through all those types of options with our allies, especially as this House is not committed to putting boots on the ground. As my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) said, we cannot commit to a no-fly zone unless we are prepared to shoot down planes or helicopters that violate that zone. We need to think very carefully about the consequences.

Liz Kendall rose—

Boris Johnson: I am really sorry, but I must make some progress.

We must consult on this as widely as possible, and, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield suggested, I will certainly be talking to everybody involved in the 1991 effort to provide no-fly zones over northern Iraq. We must ensure that we have innovative ways of getting aid into Aleppo and, as several Members have said, we must step up the pressure on Assad’s regime and on the Russians through sanctions. I listened carefully to what was said. The House will accept that there is a certain friability in the European resolve to impose sanctions on Russia, given the large dependency of many European countries on Russian gas. It is vital that our country remains at the forefront of keeping that resolve from crumbling, which is what we are doing.

In the long term—to get to the point made by the hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury—the only realistic solution is to persuade both sides to agree to a ceasefire and then to work towards a political solution. It is of course true that that process has been stopped since April, when the ceasefire was destroyed. That does not mean that the process is dead, and it must not mean that the process is dead. On the contrary, this country and this Government have worked to keep that flame of hope alive and have worked for a settlement. On 7 September we hosted a session in London with the high negotiations committee of the Syrian opposition, which set out a detailed and progressive vision for how to achieve a transition in Syria towards a democratic, pluralist administration in which the rights of all communities in that country would be respected, but would also preserve the stability and institutions of the Syrian state while getting rid of the Assad regime.

Emily Thornberry: Before we run out of time, may I rephrase the right hon. Gentleman on the question that I asked about getting rid of the jihadi fighters from eastern Aleppo?

Boris Johnson: As the hon. Lady will understand, one cannot get rid of the jihadi fighters from eastern Aleppo as long as the population of Aleppo is being bombed in a ruthless aerial bombardment that is driving people into a position in which they will do anything to fight and resist the Assad regime. Our best hope is to persuade the Russians that it is profoundly in their interests to take the initiative, to win the acclaim of the international community, to do the right thing in Syria, to call off their puppets in the Assad regime, to stop the bombing, to bring peace to Aleppo and to have a genuine ceasefire. That is the way; that is the prelude. I am perfectly prepared to look at Staffan de Mistura’s proposals for leading out al-Nusra and all the rest of it, and perhaps to bring in a UN contingent—that all sounds eminently sensible—but a ceasefire and the end of the Russian bombardment has to come first, and I hope that the hon. Lady agrees.

I think that millions of people in Syria are yearning for that outcome and for a return to talks. I hope that they will hear the passion of this afternoon’s debate. They will recognise that, of course, there are no easy solutions and no pat answers to this. They also know that this House and our constituents are disgusted by the behaviour of Assad and his regime. I hope that in Moscow and Damascus they will hear the message from British MPs that we are willing to consider anything honestly and practically that can be done to bring peace and hope back to Syria. I am grateful to all Members who have spoken so passionately this afternoon.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the unfolding humanitarian catastrophe in Aleppo and more widely across Syria.

Mr Speaker: May I thank colleagues for taking part in the debate and for the succinct and comprehensive way in which they have addressed this important issue?
Small Charitable Donations and Childcare Payments Bill

Second Reading

Mr Speaker: If colleagues who are leaving, unaccountably, could do so quickly and quietly, that would be greatly appreciated.

3.49 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jane Ellison): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

I obviously welcome the number of colleagues who have remained in the Chamber after the important debate that has just happened. I am sure that they will contribute to the debate on this important and, I hope, uncontroversial topic, as we set out to give further support to our fantastic charity sector. Although the Bill proposes relatively minor changes, they are really important none the less, because they can further the practical support that we give to our outstanding charities sector in this country, and the childcare payments provisions will help families with childcare. I shall take both aspects in turn and start with the measures to help the UK’s charity sector.

I am sure that I speak for everyone in the House when I say that I am enormously proud of the fantastic work done by charitable organisations in this country. Obviously, as the Member for Battersea, I might be forgiven for pausing to make special mention of just one of those charities: the fantastic animal charity, the Battersea Dogs and Cats Home—one of the most famous animal charities in the world, let alone in this country, which finds new homes for more than 8,000 animals every year. Indeed, the Treasury has been a beneficiary of its efforts recently, with the appointment of the new chief mouser, Gladstone the cat, which managed to make me only the second new arrival from Battersea to the Treasury over the summer.

Right across this country and our constituencies, we see charities of all shapes and sizes right at the heart of our communities, whether large charities working here in the UK and across the world, researching cures for diseases or running relief efforts for those who suffer from conflict or crisis—obviously, Haiti is in our minds at the moment, and the House has just debated Syria, where so many charities are doing such brave and important work—or the smaller, more specialised charities run by just a handful of dedicated volunteers. We want to give them all the support that they deserve.

Last year alone, we provided more than £5 billion to help our charities to do more of that brilliant work. Of course, one of the biggest ways that we give them that support is through gift aid, which was worth about £1.3 billion last year. We want as many charities as possible to benefit from that, but as things stand, it is not always practical or feasible for charities to claim it. If people are out there, collecting money with a bucket, for example, they can hardly ask someone to fill in a gift aid declaration form, alongside giving a handful of small change. That is why, as many colleagues who were here during the last Parliament will remember, we introduced the gift aid small donations scheme in 2013, to allow charities and community amateur sports clubs to claim a gift aid-style top-up payment on donations received in circumstances where it is difficult or burdensome to obtain a gift aid declaration.

It is important to point out that that scheme is not a replacement for gift aid. Where charities can obtain a gift aid declaration, they should do so. Unlike gift aid, which is a tax relief linked to donors’ tax contributions, the gift aid small donations scheme is a public spending measure, under which the Government pay a top-up of 25p for every pound of eligible donations received, regardless of the donor’s tax status. This scheme was designed to complement gift aid. When we introduced the scheme, we promised that we would review how it was working after three years, and we have done so. It is therefore a pleasure, as a result of that review, to introduce three measures in the Bill that will make further improvements to the scheme.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way before going into more detail. I fully appreciate the need for extra simplicity. Would not a bold step be to assume that all charitable donations are subject to tax relief overall? I appreciate that that cannot be done straightforwardly because enormous sums are involved, but could that be the trajectory that the Government take ultimately to make the tax treatment of charities incredibly simple indeed?

Jane Ellison: My hon. Friend is right to suggest that we are seeking as much simplicity as we can get, but I will perhaps come on to and tease out during the debate why we want to ensure that that simplicity and light touch goes alongside a degree of assurance. Finding that balance is perhaps one of the areas where a range of views will be expressed. We are keen to have a degree of assurance about the claims made and the public money given to charities.

On the consultation that took place, it might help colleagues to know that John Low, the chief executive of the Charities Aid Foundation, has said: “The inclusion of a Small Charitable Donations Bill could be good news for charities, particularly for smaller organisations which have often struggled to unlock the benefits of Gift Aid. This provides a real opportunity to simplify the scheme”—that is the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge)—“and make it fit for the 21st century”.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): Small charities in my constituency include the Leasowes walled garden project, which is part of the Halesowen Abbey Trust—a small organisation dependent on small donations. What plans does the Minister have to communicate to those small charities the benefits of the scheme that she is outlining?

Jane Ellison: My hon. Friend might be interested to know that Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs has a team that goes out promoting these schemes. I was really impressed to read that since 2014 it had given more than 600 presentations to charities of all sorts of sizes, up and down the country, but he is right to say that we can always do more. I really hope that as a result of the Bill and this debate, colleagues will feel that they, too, can play an important role in telling charities in their area the good news that the scheme just got easier. Obviously, we all have a lot of contact with smaller charities in particular, and we get to know them over the years in which we represent them.
The changes are the result of months of consultation and constructive discussion with the charity sector. I thank the hundreds of charities, representative bodies and other organisations that worked with HMRC to make this review work.

Let me turn to the first of our proposed changes. The Bill will make an important change to the criteria for eligibility for the gift aid small donations scheme. Currently, to be eligible, a charity must have been registered for at least two full tax years, and have claimed gift aid in at least two of the previous four tax years, without a gap of longer than a year; obviously, that is around the assurance process. The Bill removes both those criteria, allowing newer and smaller charities to access the scheme sooner. As we all know, for a charity, those early years are important. The change will provide a welcome financial boost when it is most needed. This is a substantial simplification of the scheme; the only remaining eligibility criterion that charities and community amateur sports clubs will need to meet is the gift aid matching requirement, under which charities must claim £1 of full gift aid for every £10 claimed under the small donations scheme.

There are two reasons why we feel it is necessary to retain this rule. The first is to incentivise charities to engage with the full gift aid scheme, which will provide them with even greater income over the longer term. The second is to protect from fraud the small donations scheme, which has substantially fewer record-keeping requirements than gift aid—an important factor that was looked at when the scheme was first designed back in 2012. It is by retaining the rule that donations under the scheme must be matched with gift aid donations that we can best do that. We are simplifying the rules on eligibility as far as possible to allow as many charities as we can to benefit, while protecting the integrity of the scheme.

James Duddridge: While I fully support the point that the Minister makes, I can conceive of a time when it is decided in a review that that link is not the correct one. Will the Minister consider adding a clause in Committee that would allow us to take out that requirement without going through the cumbersome primary legislative process in this House again? That would effectively allow her successors to make a slightly different decision in future, without having to come back to the House.

Jane Ellison: Clearly, all the points that colleagues make on Second Reading will be carefully considered and debated again in Committee. I understand my hon. Friend’s direction of thinking, but perhaps that will be discussed further in Committee.

The second important change enabled by the Bill is the future proofing of the small donations scheme to ensure that charities that use modern, innovative ways to collect money such as contactless donations will still be able to benefit. The small donations scheme was never intended to cover other methods of donation such as direct debit, online and text messaging, for which well-established and well-used processes for claiming gift aid exist. That remains the case, but we recognise that cash transactions have declined as new, innovative payment technologies have become more prevalent. We believe that the gift aid small donations scheme should keep pace with these amazing modern techniques.

Contactless donations collected using dedicated charity collection terminals share many of the same practical problems as bucket collections. Transactions are instant, and there is little opportunity for fundraisers to engage with donors to solicit a gift aid declaration. The Bill will therefore extend the scheme so that donations made using contactless technology will be eligible for top-up payments.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): I welcome that decision by the Government. I should say, as I tabled an amendment to the original Bill to suggest exactly that future proofing, that I am glad that the Government have got there, perhaps a few years later than they might have done. However, is it really fair to end up with a different treatment if I swipe my phone cleverly at some terminal rather than if I happen to text the number that comes up on my screen? My sense is that I would not be willing to give details of my address through my mobile phone provider, so can we not be a little more generous and allow text donations in that situation?

Jane Ellison: Text messages can, as my hon. Friend knows, be gift aided, so we do not expect problems in that regard, but the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Mr Wilson), will seek to respond more fully on those points at the end of the debate.

The final change proposed in the Bill is simplifying the rules on the top-ups that charities can receive on donations that they receive in their community buildings. Those rules were designed to ensure fairness and parity of treatment for charities structured in different ways. Without those rules, some charities are entitled to hundreds of thousands of pounds more than others simply because of differences in their historical structures. The gift aid small donations scheme is particularly well used by local churches. That was made clear by the Archbishops Council, which recently noted that in 2014 parishes could claim record levels of gift aid, with a significant part of the increase arising from the use of the gift aid small donations scheme. We want churches to continue to benefit from the valuable extra income provided by the small donations scheme, but it is important that the scheme continues to deliver the policy intention of providing fair and equal outcomes regardless of structure. The Bill will therefore address an anomaly in the original legislation.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I support the Bill, and I am grateful to the Minister for her explanation, but does she accept that the majority of charities, especially in my constituency, are small and rely solely for governance on volunteers? There has been a reduction in volunteer numbers across the United Kingdom. For many the Bill does not go far enough in promoting equal access to fundraising opportunities for charities that do not rely on staff.

Jane Ellison: Perhaps that is something that we can look at in more detail in Committee.

These are important simplifications. Throughout the consultation, we received supportive comments from charities, as demonstrated in the quote I gave earlier. There are always additional asks, and we would all want to be open to ideas about how we can further support
make it easier for charities of all sizes. However, we think that the measures that we have introduced in the Bill are important next steps to have introduced in the Bill are important next steps to charities. Does my hon. Friend recognise that many smaller charities do not even know that the scheme exists, so part of the challenge that we face is communicating with them properly so that they know that the scheme will be a lot less complex and that they can benefit from it? What measures will she put in place to ensure that that happens?

Dr Daniel Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): There is a lot of merit in the Bill, which reaches out to ensure that smaller charities benefit from the scheme. Does my hon. Friend recognise that many smaller charities do not even know about this and still perceive it? What measures will she put in place to ensure that they know that, among the many small, local civil society groups, the scouts and guides, the air and sea cadets and other local uniformed groups, in particular, will benefit from this change and will be able to receive the support they deserve for the vital work they carry out in our communities.

Dr Daniel Poulter: There is a lot of merit in the Bill, which reaches out to ensure that smaller charities benefit from the scheme. Does my hon. Friend recognise that many smaller charities do not even know about this and still perceive it? What measures will she put in place to ensure that they know that the scheme exists, so part of the challenge that we face is communicating with them properly so that they know that the scheme will be a lot less complex and that they can benefit from it? What measures will she put in place to ensure that that happens?

Jane Ellison: I have already mentioned HMRC’s outreach work, which I will certainly be encouraging. More promotional opportunities are planned, and I know that the Minister for Civil Society will say more about that at the end of the debate. It is a fair point and we want to make it easier, but obviously there are people who just do not know about this and still perceive barriers, so everything we can do to challenge that is welcome. We are extremely keen to hear thoughts from across the House on how we can do that, so we are always listening. I am very happy to put those suggestions to HMRC, and I know that my ministerial colleague will be happy to consider that in his Department as well.

Let me clarify the anomaly and how we are addressing it. The anomaly in the original legislation allows some charities to claim more than others, based only on how they are structured. The Government welcome the supportive and constructive approach adopted by the Church of England, the Roman Catholic Church and other religious groups during the recent consultation on the change.

The Bill also considerably relaxes the rules on where charities can receive donations that are still eligible for the gift aid small donations scheme. Currently, the scheme’s so-called community buildings rules mean that charities can claim top-up payments only on donations received during charitable activities that take place within the community building. However, we know that many local charities, although based in community buildings, carry out most of their activities in the local community, away from the building itself, which means they are unable to benefit fully from the small donations scheme. The Bill therefore relaxes the rules to allow charities based in community buildings to claim top-up payments on donations received outside the building but within the local community area. Colleagues will be delighted to know that, among the many small, local civil society groups, the scouts and guides, the air and sea cadets and other local uniformed groups, in particular, will benefit significantly from this change and will be able to receive the support they deserve for the vital work they carry out in our communities.

Taken together, this package of reforms has the potential to provide a real boost to many charities, particularly the up to 9,000 new charities that apply for recognition by HMRC every year. Based on provisional estimates, these changes are expected to benefit charities by £15 million a year, a significant increase that underlines the Government’s commitment to supporting a greater number of charities and a greater number of donations. The final figures will be certified by the independent Office for Budget Responsibility as part of this year’s autumn statement.

So far I have talked about the changes that will further support our charities. Let me turn briefly to the tax-free childcare aspects of the Bill, which will help us ensure that it is easier for hard-pressed parents to receive the support they need. In the previous Parliament we legislated to introduce tax-free childcare. That will provide up to £2,000 of Government support for childcare costs per child a year, which parents can use with any childcare provider they choose. The idea is that they can simply apply online to open an account for each child, and that for every £8 a parent pays in, we will pay in an additional £2. The system will be trialled later this year and then gradually rolled out to parents from early next year.

During our user testing of the system to date, we have found a couple of minor technical issues that we need to resolve in order to make it as straightforward as possible for parents. The Bill therefore makes two minor technical amendments to ensure that the scheme operates as intended. The first technical change relates to the duty of parents to confirm that they remain eligible to receive tax-free childcare each quarter. The Bill will allow greater flexibility over when parents are asked to make this confirmation. It will mean that once a quarter parents can confirm their eligibility for all their children at the same time, rather than having to do it separately for each child if they registered them at different times.

The second technical change will mean that parents can use a standard online form if they want to query a decision. That will make the process much more straightforward and convenient. We still want to ensure that everyone can ask for a review, so anyone who would struggle to get online will still be able to raise their queries in other ways.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Can the Minister confirm that what she has said is that credits will be available for each child, and that there will not be a two-child limit, as is proposed for working families tax credits? Can she compare the regime that will be offered under this Bill, which has shown great consideration to parents, with what would be the case for families on working families tax credits?

Jane Ellison: I might have to come back to the hon. Gentleman on the latter point about the comparison, because it is not really within the scope of the Bill. I can confirm that we are proposing only two changes—everything else is unchanged from the original legislation, and we are not proposing that there should be any other changes in the Bill.

As I said at the outset, the changes made through the Bill are relatively minor and technical, but they are important, whether they are making it easier for more of our charities to claim extra funding to support the fantastic work they do up and down the land in our constituencies, or whether they are making sure that hard-working parents can access tax-free childcare in the most simple and efficient way possible when it is introduced. The Small Charitable Donations and Childcare Payments Bill delivers against both those objectives, and I therefore commend it to the House.
Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): It is a pleasure to debate opposite the Minister today, as always.

The Bill primarily makes changes to the gift aid small donations scheme and some technical changes to the tax-free childcare scheme. The Opposition are broadly supportive of the specific measures in this nine-clause Bill, but we have a few concerns, which I will briefly outline.

The gift aid small donations scheme was established, as many are probably aware, in 2012 with cross-party support. The idea behind it was that, in situations where it is impractical to get a gift aid declaration in the usual way, such as through collection boxes or church plates, a charity can claim a gift aid-style top-up payment from the Government. A charity can claim 25% on cash donations of £20 or less, up to a yearly total that is now at £8,000.

Since April 2016, a charity has been able to claim £2,000 in a tax year from the Government under the scheme. However, that is subject to a number of qualifying criteria, which must be met if a charity is to access the scheme in the first instance. The Bill removes a number of those qualifying rules to make it easier for smaller charities to access the scheme. I will run through those changes only briefly, as the Minister has already given a fantastic overview of them.

The scheme currently includes a requirement to have been registered as a charity for at least two full tax years—the two-year eligibility rule. The charity must also have made a successful gift aid claim in at least two of the previous four tax years, with no more than two years’ gap between claims—the two-in-four-years claims rule. Clause 1 removes those two rules entirely and makes consequential amendments to the Small Charitable Donations Act 2012 and the secondary legislation that provides for the administration of the scheme.

Clause 2 amends the definition of a small payment to include donations via contactless payments, as we have heard. Clauses 3 and 4 widen the community buildings rules. Clause 3 would essentially allow a charity to claim £8,000 for small donations raised anywhere or up to £8,000 for donations collected from each community building it has. In the latter case, donations would include those “made in person in the local authority area in which the community building is situated”.

Clause 4 would make a series of amendments to the rules for connected charities making claims, where one or more of the charities runs charitable activities in a community building. A group of charities would then be entitled to make a claim of up to £8,000 for small donations made in the local authority area in which each community building is located. Alternatively, it would be able to make a claim of up to £8,000 for small donations made anywhere in the UK.

When the gift aid small donations scheme was implemented, Labour was generally supportive of the initiative, as the Minister is aware, but we raised concerns at the time that it was quite complex and could create barriers for small charities that could be eligible to claim the top-up payment. Indeed, the Opposition spokesperson at the time said:

“The Bill will make a difference to charities and perhaps changes will be made after the three-year review.”—[Official Report, 26 November 2012; Vol. 554, c. 110.]

The complexity has since been confirmed by the charity sector in practice, and I am pleased that, in this Bill and the consultation preceding it, the Government have acknowledged that there is a problem. However, I am aware that the charity sector has expressed disappointment that the Government have not gone further, a little of which has been reflected in the interventions made so far. The Charity Finance Group, for instance, has said the changes were a missed opportunity for widespread reform of the scheme and that the Government were “locking in future failure”.

In particular, some charities have been calling for changes to the matching requirement, which stipulates that to make a claim under the small donations scheme the charity needs to receive gift aid donations in the same tax year. The total of eligible donations on which the charity can claim a top-up payment is restricted to an amount equal to 10 times the amount of the net donations on which gift aid is claimed for that year. Charity organisations have made representations arguing that changing the matching requirement would remove a significant barrier, particularly for small charities. Indeed, a survey carried out by the National Council for Voluntary Organisations found that 50% of respondents with an income under £10,000 want the matching requirement to be removed or reduced. Will the Minister take the opportunity when summing up to explain in more detail why the Government have not addressed the charity sector’s main concern about the matching requirement?

When discussing eligibility criteria for any kind of Government grant, the issue of fraud must be considered. The Opposition have several concerns about how loosening the eligibility criteria could have an impact on that risk. It is widely known that some charities have been abused in the past, being used as a vehicle to avoid tax and indeed to launder money. In the 1960s and 1970s, there were some high profile cases involving large companies, such as Metal Box and Imperial Tobacco, which used supposed charities to provide education for the children of the UK, but actually spent the money solely to pay the school fees of their directors’ children. That may seem a long time ago, but I am trying to make the point that there is always scope for abuse in such schemes. I hope that the Government will look carefully at any potential loopholes. We must make sure that any loosening of the rules for access to Government grants or tax reliefs does not provide a further incentive for tax avoiders, albeit a small minority, to set up a charity.

I will turn briefly to the elements of the Bill relating to tax-free childcare. Clause 5 will make three minor technical amendments to the tax-free childcare scheme. As the explanatory notes to the Bill explain, under the tax-free childcare scheme, parents will receive top-up payments quarterly and will have to reconfirm at the end of each quarter that they still meet the eligibility criteria. This entitlement period is currently three months, but can be varied by no more than one month by secondary legislation. Clause 5 changes that period to two months, which simply allows for the alignment of eligibility periods for additional children. The other minor change is to the way in which applications for a review of a decision by HMRC can be made. The Bill will allow secondary legislation to be introduced to enable such applications to be made digitally.

Although I appreciate that the Bill makes only minor changes to the tax-free childcare scheme, I believe it is within the scope of a Second Reading debate to discuss
the wider policy background. As the Minister will be all
too aware, the Opposition have some concerns about
tax-free childcare. In particular, the policy is hugely
regressive. For instance, the saving is capped at £2,000
per child, as an additional 20p from the Government on
top of every 80p spent by the parent, so to get the
maximum benefit people would need to spend £10,000
a year on childcare. That is not an option for many
working families, and it is not therefore the most efficient
way of providing Government support to cover the cost
of childcare.

Families certainly need help with childcare costs,
which have soared in the past six years of Tory Government.
Parents now spend £1,600 more each year than they did
in 2010, according to Labour party analysis. According
to new data taken from freedom of information requests,
costs in some local areas have risen by more than 200%.
Labour has established a childcare taskforce, led by the
shadow Secretary of State for Education, to bring forward
proposals for a comprehensive system of universal,
affordable and good quality childcare.

James Duddridge: Quite often in these debates, we
hear the House of Commons Library quoted, but very
rarely do we hear the words “Labour party research”.
In order that we can look at those figures in a little more
detail, would she be prepared to put that work and the
workings that underlie her assertion in the House of
Commons Library, so that we can all probe them and
reassure ourselves that they are correct and valid figures?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I certainly would. If the hon.
Gentleman contacts my office directly, I shall be happy
to have a chat or to provide him with details directly so
that he can peruse them at his leisure.

I want to point the Minister in the direction of the
findings of Labour’s childcare taskforce when they become
available. I hope the Government can glean some good
ideas from it, because they have a bit of form for
borrowing ideas, shall we say, of late. I am pleased that
the Chancellor has gleaned some good ideas from the
Opposition, especially in respect of investing in our
economy. However, I am digressing slightly, Mr Deputy
Speaker.

I confirm that the Opposition are broadly supportive
of the Bill and the steps within it that will make the gift
aid small donations scheme more accessible to smaller
charities. That said, we do have some concerns, which I
have outlined, and I hope the Minister will address
them when he sums up.

4.21 pm

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I have to
declare an interest, as I am sure will many Members
who are present, as a Member of Parliament who has
set up a charity. In fact, I have set up two. The fact that,
20 years on, only one still exists shows part of the
experience of people who set up charities for good
causes, because it is often hard to sustain the funding.
The first is a charity that supports people who suffer
from substance abuse and it is flourishing, but with the
second, which was set up to support the victims of
domestic violence, I found it hard to continue to secure
funds. That is the nature of charitable work and it will
not stop any of us from setting up new charities. Hopefully,
the Bill will encourage more of us and our constituents
to take such opportunities.

Speaking on behalf of the Church of England, I
welcome the Small Charitable Donations and Childcare
Payments Bill because it contains important provisions
to ensure that gift aid donations are effective and benefit
as many charities as possible. The Lloyds Bank Foundation
and the NCVO, to which the hon. Member for Salford
and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) referred, have found
that donation income has been falling for small charities
and that the scheme that was put in place in 2013 has
not fulfilled the potential for which it was invented.
We are here today to improve that situation.

Conversely and encouragingly, parish churches across
the country raised a record sum of £953 million in 2013.
That is why the Minister referred to the fact that the
Church received record levels of gift aid in 2014—the
two things go hand in hand. That figure represents a
combined increase of £24 million on the previous year,
and that happened despite the economic challenges
parishioners face in the post-2008 world.

In addition to supporting the work of the Church at
parish, diocesan and national level, parishes continue
to give more than £46 million to other organisations working
around the world, from food banks and local children’s
charities to international aid appeals—the range is huge.
Contrary to the general trend of reducing donations to
small charities, church congregations have clearly been
giving sacrificially. I am sure that they would give more
so if we made it easier, simpler and more compelling
to do so. That is what I believe the Bill will achieve.

The changes the Government are proposing should
produce a simpler and more equitable system. Some
churches and charities found the previous system complex.
Technically, they were eligible to claim up to £8,000 for
donations received during charitable activities and to
use the so-called top-up elements for donations collected
in home communications and wall safes, but not those
collected in services.

It is clear just from my trying to explain it to Members
that that is quite a complex distinction, and it proved
difficult for record keeping. I am sure all of us have had
the experience, during our constituency duties, of sitting
in a civic service, conscientiously filling out the little
envelope in the pew in front of us—of course while
paying absolute attention to the sermon being preached.
Every time I have done that, I have thought to myself
that I do not envy the church treasurer’s task in trying
to decipher my writing. I cannot help but feel that the
innovative suggestions of my hon. Friend the Member
for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge)
could be applied to a better way of doing that in future
—one feels there just must be a better way.

More than 100 parishes and dioceses responded to a
call for evidence from HMRC and the Treasury. The
Government have clearly listened to their concerns about
the perceived imbalance between the two elements of
the original scheme. The greater simplicity of the revised
gift aid and small donations scheme should bring greater
equity and greater compliance, especially for small churches.
I do have a few questions for the Minister, however.

I want to ask about the progression towards contactless
payment, provision for which is made in the Bill. How
does that sit with the responses that the National Council
for Voluntary Organisations received from 340 charities
that showed that cheques were the most favoured method for inclusion, and that more than two thirds of respondents wished cheques to be added to the scheme? Two thirds of charities also wanted one-off online donations to be included. Events give rise to occasions when people want to give a donation on a one-off basis. Will the Minister look at that?

Perversely, only 36% of respondents wanted contactless donations included, yet those are in the Bill. Now, far be it from me to look backwards in time to the way in which things have always been done; we must of course look forwards, and make contactless giving the way of the future, especially so as to embrace the next generation. But we should acknowledge that many older donors are among the most generous. There is no question but that for them the trusty old cheque book is one way of making sure, for their own records, that they know how they are managing their money and where they are giving money. I hope the Minister will be able to reassure me that there will be no demographic discrimination as a result of the Bill.

Our society has a strong tradition of philanthropy, reflecting its Judaeo-Christian origins, in which we are enjoined to help those less fortunate than ourselves. With so many good causes, and challenges facing us every day, surely we should be doing all we can to promote that tradition of digging deep and giving as much as we possibly can to those who need it. We need to make sure that more charities are able to benefit, and I am pleased that the Bill will assist new charities.

Hardly a day goes by without the need for a new charity to be born, even perhaps at the hands of a Member of Parliament acting as its midwife. I hope that the Bill will reinforce the tradition—a hallmark of British society—of being willing to give to others in need.

4.28 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I am a fairly new Member of Parliament and was not here when the Small Charitable Donations Act 2012 was passed, so it is interesting to hear some of the history of how the small donations scheme started and how it has got to where it is just now. It was also interesting to hear about some of the changes being made as a result of looking back, three years in, and thinking about how the scheme has worked. I am pleased that the Government have taken on board some of the suggestions charities have made, to ensure that the scheme works as well as possible for those charities using it and for the Government, who have to administer it.

Some of the measures in the Bill are welcome. The SNP welcomes the removal of the eligibility criteria for new charities. That is a sensible way to go—it is sensible to make changes particularly in respect of the two-in-four-year criteria. The inclusion of contactless payment is to be welcomed. There was an interesting comment about text donations. I am not entirely sure how they fit in, but I would be keen for text donations to be included in the small donations part of gift aid and not just in the general part of gift aid, because so many people nowadays give by text message—it is a very easy way for people to give—but do not follow up with a text about their address. I have done the same thing.

I could be wrong, but from my reading of the Library briefing, I understand that the UK Government have the ability to change the matching requirement without the need for further primary legislation, as introduced in the Small Charitable Donations Act 2012.

Like the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), we have concerns about the 10:1 ratio. My hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) mentioned charities that are run solely by volunteers. Some of those charities do not do gift aid because the paperwork is far too cumbersome. Doing general gift aid and gift aid small donations claims paperwork would be doubly cumbersome, particularly for those that do not have staff. Those are among our smallest charities. In some cases, they never get donations of more than £20. They work in our most deprived communities and therefore are most in need of those donations—they get £3 here and there but it is just too complicated for them to jump through the hoops of any of those schemes. They believe that they are unable to deal with the small donations scheme because of the requirement additionally to take part in the matching for the gift aid scheme.

It would therefore be good for the Government to consider the impact on small charities. As was mentioned, for those small charities, it will not involve huge sums of money and people spending thousands of pounds sending their children to private schools. For example, a local organisation in my constituency buys shovels so that people can clean the pavements in the winter time—they are smaller-use pavements that the council does not get to. It receives a very small amount of money, but is most in need of access to those schemes and is being excluded because it does not have the staff and the ability to fill in the paperwork. If the Government could consider that and the matching requirement, it could have an impact on small charities.

Dr Poulter: The hon. Lady is making a thoughtful and constructive speech and highlights some of the challenges for smaller charities that are mostly comprised of volunteers, who do not always have the understanding of and expertise in complex legislation when they are in post. That will clearly be the challenge of this and other legislation in the field. In that respect, is she saying—there may be merit if she is—that some of the anti-fraud measures are too restrictive and add complexity in respect of the funding requirements? Given the other anti-fraud measures in charities legislation, is there an argument for scrapping some of those measures altogether?

Kirsty Blackman: I would worry about the unintended consequences for anti-fraud legislation—I would not want to scrap those measures for very large charities that deal with large sums of money. We need to consider how very small charities, which cannot defraud the Government out of thousands of pounds in gift aid claims because they get donations of only £500 in total in a whole year—they will not break the bank—will access both the gift aid small donations scheme and the gift aid scheme in general. That is the majority of what I wanted to say on the gift aid small donations scheme.

On tax-free childcare, I cannot declare an interest in having set up a charity. As the parent of a five-year-old and a three-year-old, however, I can declare an interest in the current childcare voucher scheme and I am also keen to be a beneficiary of tax-free childcare from next year when it is introduced. The childcare voucher scheme has been useful but limited, so I welcome some of the
changes that will come in through the tax-free childcare scheme. These schemes will be easier to access for parents from less traditional employment backgrounds. That is a positive benefit, as is the uplift in the amount of money they will be able to claim. However, the UK Government’s proposals do not go far enough.

The Bill’s proposals on flexibility of dates and the ability to make requests digitally are hugely positive. The childcare voucher scheme has sometimes fallen down because of the inability to make some changes digitally. I know parents who have not changed the amount they claim when they needed to because it takes 15 days or so to make a change, and it involves a lot of printing out, posting and so on. The three-month rule is much clearer.

The UK Government’s proposals on childcare and inequality are not universal enough. The Scottish Government pledged in their manifesto to almost double the free early learning and childcare to 30 hours a week. Both my children have benefited from the uplift in free childcare and nursery places, and that has been hugely positive. Nursery places are now for three hours and 10 minutes a day. That is a length of time one can do something with, whereas two-and-a-half hours is not. By the time you get home and make a cup of tea, your morning has gone, whereas you can pop out and do a full shop in three hours and 10 minutes. Having those extra few minutes makes the biggest difference. The additional changes will make even more of a difference, with full days for two, three and four-year-olds. It is important that the changes are not just for three and four-year-olds, but some two-year-olds too. The changes mean that some three and four-year-olds will receive free school meals. Primary and one, two and three-year-old children in Scotland already receive free school meals. Again, that is a huge benefit. Again, I declare an interest as someone whose child receives free school meals—they are absolutely brilliant and he loves them. Nursery children will now also receive these meals.

The benefits that families in Scotland receive are universal, not means-tested. There is not a complicated means-testing system to decide which families receive them. There is no requirement for both parents to be working. Children across the board receive the benefits, whatever their demographic or socioeconomic background, are benefiting from high-quality free childcare.

We are also introducing baby boxes, again on a universal basis. They are an import from Finland and they have been hugely successful. The issues with the tax-free childcare scheme relate to it not being universal and not being provided to enough families. Some of the families most in need will not benefit from access to free childcare, particularly if they are going through the process of job seeking or anything like that. They are the ones who would benefit most from free childcare, which would enable them to access appointments, interviews and interview preparation, so the lack of universality is a concern.

We are largely supportive of the specific proposals in the Bill. We have concerns about gift matching and we will likely return to that next week, but I appreciate the opportunity to speak today.

James Duddridge (Rochford and Southend East) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker; it is great to catch your eye. It has been a while since I spoke from the Back Benches, and I have certainly never before spoken after the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman).

This place is at its best when we can use real-life examples and be a lot more passionate than when we are simply reading from a briefing document. Whether we are talking about the two-and-a-half hours, or however long it takes to make a cup of tea, about charities shovelling snow, which we do not have in Southend—I suspect we do not have the snow, which is something my children would very much like—I share with the hon. Lady some understanding of the credits. My youngest is five, so I greatly sympathise with her. In particular, I thank her for pulling me up and correcting my intervention about whether it was possible under the existing legislation to change the 1:10 ratio, although I would like to return to that in a lot more detail later in my speech.

This is the first time I have spoken from the Back Benches in some time and it is a particular pleasure to do so on the subject of charities. My constituents are an awful lot more interested in charities and what we can do for them in Southend than they are in some of the very good work that I did overseas. Important as that work was, charity begins at home, and in this case it begins in Southend.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Does my hon. Friend not agree that there are some tremendous small charities founded in our communities that seek to help communities abroad, whether by helping orphanages or schools? Does he agree that we need to support them as much as our charities at home?

James Duddridge: I thank my hon. Friend for pulling me up. In fact, round the corner from my office is a charity that supports people in Uganda, which was within the geographic patch that I was responsible for. It is indeed a Southend charity and it would receive some of the benefits of this legislation.

The Second Church Estates Commissioner, my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), mentioned the great value of churches in the community. Like perhaps other Members, I want to pepper my speech with examples from my constituency. I want to pay particular credit to the Southend Association of Voluntary Services, which pulls together charities and best practice and allows charities to be given the expertise to utilise the types of benefits that the Government are introducing.

It seems like only a hop, skip and a jump since 2006, when I remember throwing two lever-arch folders into my bin in Portcullis House, in the knowledge that I would never again have to look at charities legislation. I should have kept those two Bills, but I went back and looked at the Charities Act 2006. It was a much bigger Bill, with 78 clauses, rather than the nine clauses we are considering today. There are a lot of things that are still relevant today: the debate about whether schools should be charities, and whether or not it is itself a charitable good or whether charities need to go out and prove themselves over and above. A lot has changed. My hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Turner) was
speaking from the Opposition Front Bench, and there was also a gentleman from Doncaster North—a junior Cabinet Minister with great, or maybe not so great, things ahead of him—who did a good job on that Bill.

One charities issue that was raised during the passage of the 2006 Act was “chugging”, or charities mugging. I notice that the short title of this short, nine-clause Bill is quite wide, so there are perhaps opportunities to insert a few more clauses, whether proposed by Her Majesty’s official Opposition or enthusiastic young Members of Parliament such as myself, or—[Laughter.] It does not say “Pause for laughter” in my notes; that was not a joke. Maybe the Minister will bring forward a review of charities mugging. Even now we get harassed at tube stations, and it is a distraction from the passion for charitable giving that, really, everyone wants to engage in.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr Rob Wilson): It would probably help my hon. Friend to know that we have reformed the self-regulation of charities. There is a single regulator that is now responsible for those activities, rather than the three that there were before, so we are in a much better position to deal with complaints from the public.

James Duddridge: I thank my hon. Friend for that; perhaps he will take this as a complaint from a humble member of the public. If he joined me in trying to get from Fenchurch Street station to Tower Hill in the morning, on the way to the House of Commons, he would see not only the appalling works and the way people are funnelled through, but that the number of charities operating there creates a physical boundary between the two stations, which is a real problem for commuters who otherwise would donate. There are quite a few instances when I have felt less positive about charities, which I am naturally passionate about. I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the work. Perhaps I could review what has been done while I was looking at other things since 2006, and also perhaps invite him for a cup of coffee on the corner of Fenchurch Street to meet some of my constituents coming into London and encountering the problem.

We are debating the “Small Charitable Donations” Bill, but I am not quite sure what “small” is. A Southend charity set up by Charles Latham and Howard Briggs has looked to provide a capital amount that could be used to provide small loans to micro-opportunities—non-charities but, in some cases, registered charities as well. That developed from a level of £60,000 or £80,000 to become a £1 million or £2 million fund. Even at that level, it considers itself small and has to do all its fund management via the Essex fund. My constituency predecessor, Sir Teddy Taylor, is involved in that fund. It deals with small charities, but I am not sure that it would be helped by the definition of small charities in the Bill.

I am generally a believer in small being beautiful—my wife is very petite—and in relation to charities, the closer the charity stays to an individual cause, the better. The shovels example is, I think, great. Southend’s charities want to do something for targeted HIV/AIDS patients within a certain age category. It is another fabulous example. There are, however, some bigger charities—I am not going to name them; they do good work—that have somewhat lost their way. These are the ones that we see on the back pages of The Guardian, in case any of my hon. Friends sully themselves with such things—they are very good for the fireplace. We can often find a job with such a charity paying significantly more than an MP’s salary—shock, horror. This could be running a charity, or doing a junior, second-tier director job, but, as I say, small is beautiful and the more we can help small charities with the sort of provisions in the Bill, the better. At the moment, there is a flight for merging charities, meaning that charities get much bigger. When they do, I fear they move too far away from their communities. We should encourage those charities to stay small but numerous.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an amusing but serious point. If I am fortunate enough to catch your eye, Mr Deputy Speaker, I, too, will mention some charities in my constituency. When it comes to small charities, does my hon. Friend agree that many of them are struggling at the moment, and that the measures in the Bill will give them boost, especially if we help to publicise them?

James Duddridge: Entirely agree with my hon. Friend. Friend that some charities are struggling and that there is a constant shift in funding. I remind Southend charities not to believe all the doom and gloom that was talked pre-Brexit. We are still growing strongly; we are the strongest-growing economy in the G7. Rather than squirrelling away money for the rainy day that might come, we should encourage people to spend, enjoy and donate some of that money to charities. The Bill’s measures should allow more of such money to come back to charities.

In common with previous speakers, I should like to mention a charity with which I was involved, although I did not start it up. I was appointed by a charity known as the Bulldog Trust, which is based just down the road from here. Its website said that it was a philanthropy organisation. I thought that it was no good for me because I do not have any significant cash to give to it—it would certainly be a £20 donation from me rather than a £20 million donation—but what this charity does is to link up people who have a skill and want to use it within a charitable organisation. That sent me to the Grow Movement, which at that time was a charity operating in Uganda, Rwanda and Malawi.

I mention that example because I am a little unclear about what happens when a charity such as the Grow Movement is UK based but international. Of the trustees, I think I was the only one domiciled in the UK; it has an international virtual board. We need to make sure that small sums, wherever they might come from, can go to such organisations. At one time it was inconceivable that someone would send a few quid from France or the United States, but now, because of the way the internet is set up, when we purchase something we are quite often asked to “click here” to enable an extra £2 to go to a charity. I urge the Minister to review the position and ensure that charities like the Grow Movement can benefit from this and future legislation.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a series of good points about the impact that the Bill could have on small charities. He has mentioned...
several in Southend, and I suspect that all of us could mention others in our own constituencies. Is he aware that the inability to reclaim through texts is a possible issue for some of those charities, and does he think that the Minister should reflect on that when winding up the debate? May I also ask what he thinks might be the impact on charities such as scouts groups that sometimes, for example, raise funds using buckets outside supermarkets. Under the new provisions, I think that they will be able to—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I know that the hon. Gentleman is doing a Whip’s job, and I do not mind that, but what we cannot have is the making of speeches rather than interventions. I want to try to help everyone, but I cannot allow myself and the Chamber to be tested by a speech rather than an intervention.

James Duddridge: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker, My hon. Friend suffers from having far too many ideas, and I look forward to—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. It might help if we heard them over a period rather than all in one go. That would help the hon. Gentleman, Gentleman, and it would help me.

James Duddridge: I am sorry, Mr Deputy Speaker. I in no way meant to challenge your ruling, but I did want to deal with the issue of SMS messages. I have absolute confidence in these two excellent Ministers, and I look forward to what will be said today. I shall go into a fair amount of detail about different payment methods later, but at this juncture, suffice it to say that SMS messages are absolutely right for this purpose. As many people have pointed out, people do not necessarily want to give all their details. There is also a demographic issue. My mother-in-law would be very happy to text a £5 donation, but if you ask her to use a smart phone or contactless payments, she thinks you are speaking a different language. It is discriminatory not to enable her to donate by text.

As for the point about the scouting movement—my eldest is going up to the scouts, and they collect—

James Duddridge: One of our excellent Ministers leaps to her feet.

Jane Ellison: I hope I can reassure my hon. Friend and, indeed, the whole House that this is a very positive measure for bob-a-job schemes up and down the country. I am sure that scouts and other uniformed youth groups will welcome it.

James Duddridge: The Minister takes me back to my own bob-a-job days in the Scouts. There was the Whip thinking that bob-a-job was something that one did on the Back Benches in order to progress in the future.

Richard Graham: Contrary to what has been suggested, Mr Deputy Speaker, this is not a bob-a-job contribution. Does my hon. Friend agree that this could also be incredibly helpful to armed forces cadets and other charities? I am thinking particularly of those who help people to pack items that they have bought in shops. Small amounts of money will often be collected in buckets to go to small causes, and the Minister has just confirmed that that will be covered.

James Duddridge: Another point is that charitable giving then begins to be inculcated in young people in particular. Their small donations, to both small and big charities, bring them into the system. Certainly, when I see someone under the age of 16 collecting for poppies or Help for Heroes, I feel that the future of the country is in safe hands.

I intervened on the Minister to ask about deeming all donations tax-free. I am sympathetic to Her Majesty’s Opposition’s points about complexity. The points have been made well today, just as they were three years ago, as Opposition Front-Bench Members pointed out. The sooner we can get through all this complexity and decide that the basic rate of tax should come back from all moneys en bloc that are given to charities in small amounts, the better. I will say more about how we define “small amounts” later.

I shall turn now to the specifics of the Bill. Clause 2 deals with the meaning of the term “small donation”, and subsection (3) refers to the United Kingdom. However, clause 6, which deals with the extent of the Bill, refers to England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Forgive me if I am being stupid, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I think that they amount to the same thing. I would be grateful if that provision could be amended, if only as a tidying-up exercise, or if the difference could be explained.

Michael Tomlinson: Before my hon. Friend moves on from the question of cash amounts, does he agree that £20 is a sensible figure? Opting for a larger amount could involve a risk of fraud or misuse, but £20 is still a substantial enough amount to make a significant difference.

James Duddridge: I do not know how to say this gently—no, I do not think that that is a sensible amount. I understand what my hon. Friend is saying, but I think that that is an arbitrary amount. Why not choose £10 or £25? Is it because we have £20 notes but not £25 notes? I worry when I see legislation that cites numbers but makes no provision whatever to take account of inflation. Would such an amount be uprated annually? If that is the case, we would end up with odd numbers in subsequent years. Alternatively, should we let things drift and conduct a review every five years, and then put the amount up by 2%? I would like the figure to be set at an awful lot higher.

Michael Tomlinson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for being patient about this point. Can he not see that the amount could be reviewed over a number of years? In fact, it has been reviewed in that way in the past, and there will doubtless be opportunities for it to be reviewed again in the future, if not by this place, perhaps through an order to be dealt with by the Minister. Would that not be a sensible approach?
James Duddridge: To review is sensible, but I think that the process should be carried out periodically to take account of inflation, instead of wasting a Minister’s time every three years. I would not want to have to come back here to review this Bill in another three years. We should be much more permissive about what we allow Ministers to do. On my hon. Friend’s underlying point, yes there could be fraud, but there can be fraud in any system. Do I think that the good people who are involved in charities would commit fraud for such a small sum of money? I do not.

I have a large number of points that I would like to make. I hope that I will be able to make them in the Public Bill Committee, if I am selected to serve on it in the coming days and weeks.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge). I think it was four years ago that we served on the Committee considering the original Bill, which later put in place the gift aid small donations scheme. I think that the hon. Members for Foyle (Mark Durkan) and for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) were also members of the Committee. At the time, we were all quite enthused about the programme; indeed, we still are. We recognise the importance of giving gift aid-style relief on small donations, especially in a way that will help small charities.

Some real improvements to the Bill have been suggested today. The introduction of contactless payments is good, although I fully agreed with what the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) said about the lack of provision for cheques. I want to dangle a little carrot in front of Government Members by saying that when the original Bill was discussed in Committee, it was discovered that—in shock, horror—it was not only £5, £10 and £20 notes that would be eligible for gift aid-style relief; and that even if someone dropped in a few euro notes, they would be eligible as well. That would be a welcome improvement along with contactless payments and a look at text donations as well. The increase in the upper limit is very welcome, and it shows how this scheme has developed and how it has the potential to help small charities. We need to realise that this Bill is all about helping small charities, because it is those charities and community groups for which this Bill was created.

In the Committee that considered the Charitable Donations Act 2012, we quibbled away at the long-forbearing Ministers about the ratio between gift aid eligibility and donations. At the time, in the original draft of the Bill, we were talking about a ratio of 3:1, 4:1 or 5:1. We asked persistently why it was one ratio and not another. The hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East just asked why there should be any link at all with gift aid. The survey from the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, the Charity Finance Group, the Institute of Fundraising and the Small Charities Coalition sets out much the same view. Even if it was felt that, for reasons of fraud, we needed that link with gift aid, why is the 10:1 ratio on a tablet of stone?

We discovered in that earlier Bill Committee that ratios of 3:1, 4:1 and 5:1 were pretty expendable. Why, if a charity is registered and has about £10 in gift aid, is that not enough in terms of fraud detection? Furthermore, I am not 100% convinced of the link with fraud. When we had that previous debate, I remember someone raising the issue of the Cup Trust, which was—I will try to put this diplomatically—involved with various fraudulent practices. We innocently asked whether it was registered for gift aid. Well of course it was, which does not suggest that there is much link between fraud and gift aid. If that is something that the Government genuinely believe is a problem, I really cannot see for the life of me why the ratio has to be 10:1; it just does not make sense.

On balance, this is a good Bill. We welcome it, but I urge the Minister, the Government and all members of the Committee to look again at the whole matching requirement, how it is constituted, and why oh why the ratio has to be 10:1.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I am very pleased to follow the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) who made some very sensible points about euros. I also welcome her positivity about the Bill in general. We have had some fascinating insights into the charities in our constituencies. It is very heartening to hear how interesting and fascinating they are and also what a charitable lot people are on the whole. That must be welcomed.

Like many Members, I have been at the end of the supermarket check-out shaking my bucket. I have helped to pack people’s groceries into bags in the hope that they will put some money into my box. I usually put on my environmental hat as well and check that they have a recycled bag. I have often been there supporting charities with my children, my friends and my family, and I know that so many other people in my constituency do that on a regular basis for so many deserving causes. For example, there is the Young Farmers Club, the West Hatch scouts, and village school fundraisers.

The SURE cancer charity in my constituency earns most of its money from small collections such as the bucket collections I have referred to. They are essential. Many of our amateur sports clubs have to collect money in that way. I have collected money with the Blackbrook tennis club, Taunton Vale hockey club and many more besides. Usually small sums of money are collected, but they are so useful. The charities really do rely on such collections.

I applaud the people who go out day in, day out collecting for small charities in my constituency, gathering money to do good work that really needs to be done—often to protect vulnerable people.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is fantastic that the changes in the Bill also include community amateur sports clubs? I know that that will be particularly welcome to groups such as bowls clubs and various other clubs in Wiltshire and up and down the country, which will help us to tackle obesity and champion healthy lifestyles.

Rebecca Pow: I welcome that intervention. I will come on to sports clubs. I know that my hon. Friend is sporty herself, as am I. Everything that we can do to help sporting charities is welcome. She raises an important point about the connection between health and wellbeing. Anything that we can do to help such clubs should be encouraged, and the Bill will definitely help.
Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Rebecca Pow: Of course I will give way to another hon. Friend from the west country.

Mr Rees-Mogg: While my hon. Friend is on about sport, may the Bill not help Somerset win the county championship for the first time ever, after coming second this year? Would that not be a real triumph after Yorkshire and Middlesex stitched it up?

Rebecca Pow: I know that my hon. Friend was down at the county ground not very long ago, because I had so many comments about the fact that he had been there. I am sorry that I missed him, because I was down there every day of that championship. I am not sure that Somerset is allowed to collect on the streets with buckets, but smaller sporting charities would be very much helped by the new enabling measures in the Bill.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): This is not just about fantastic sporting charities. I am sure that colleagues will be able to list the events going on in their constituencies, because this also concerns sporting activities. People put a great deal of effort and determination into training perhaps for a marathon, and that is a wonderful source of fundraising for local causes.

Rebecca Pow: I agree with my hon. Friend. I will come on to a bit in my speech about that because I want to mention a number of these issues. My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

Richard Graham: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Rebecca Pow: Would my hon. Friend mind if I ploughed on just for a minute? I will lose my train of thought. Would he intervene in a minute?

Whenever I visit charities in my constituency, which I do as often as I can, I ask what I can do in Westminster to help them. So often they say that they want access to gift aid. One of their biggest issues is raising funds and then being able to get the right benefits and aids. Another colleague said that often small charities do not even know what they can or cannot claim. So anything that can be done to ease that will help, and I think the Bill will do so.

Whatever we can do to help small charities retain the money that they have worked so hard to collect would be beneficial. If it could be increased with top-ups and things, that would be welcome. While the current system has many good points, it has been criticised for being complex and inaccessible especially for small and newer charities. That is why I am pleased that the Minister is speaking earlier, and I am sure that the Bill will help to make life simpler in terms of funds collected and the submissions that small charities are required to make for gift aid.

I welcome the proposed simplifications through this gift aid small donations scheme. I was also pleased that so many stakeholders took part in the consultation and so many charities fed in, and that the Government are listening and taking on board lots of their views. The scheme will definitely help those charities for which it is not practical to obtain an individual gift aid declaration for every small donation made. That is where we come back to bucket collections, the bob-a-job collections that my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) referred to, and even sponsored events. I am sure that Mr Deputy Speaker has done some himself, such as a sponsored bike ride. I did a mini-triathlon to raise money for charity. People give their support, but only with small amounts, and gathering all the intimate details that charities are required to input is often too much for them, so they do not go to the effort of claiming back what they could claim and get the benefit.

We would definitely like to help all those charities, and the Bill will do so.

I welcome the reforms that will allow charities to benefit from the top-up system that has been worked into the Bill, so I will now come on to community amateur sports clubs. I am pleased that the Minister particularly addressed areas for them, especially the point that they had to be in one building to raise their money. I am pleased that that slightly ludicrous little piece of the legislation will be relaxed.

I am an ardent advocate of the benefit of sport in our communities, cricket included. We have marvellous cricket facilities in Somerset, many of which operate from the county town, Taunton, working from entry level at school right the way up to the county ground, where my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) often goes. I particularly work with a number of sporting charities. I have helped to bring forward a water sports centre, which is being completed on the river in Taunton, with the charity, COACH—the Centre for Outdoor Activity and Community Hub. My hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Michelle Donelan) mentioned bowling. I have helped to attract funds for the bowling club in Wellington, and it is now winning major trophies right across the region. It was in the Wellington Weekly News only this week. Amateur sporting charities, such as Taunton football club, all need to raise funds, and the small change that we will make in relation to the venues where money is raised will really help them to retain more of their own money and make more of it. I welcome all that.

I will make a small nod to the eminently sensible provisions on childcare payments. A simple extension of the timescale for parents to input their children’s details to claim the correct tax free childcare bonus will make life much easier for many families, particularly those families whose circumstances have changed. For example, when two families join together, which happens quite frequently now, and people end up with their own children and some stepchildren, opening and expanding the window for people to input all the data will help all the children under one roof. I very much welcome that and hope that it will all make progress.

All the things in the Bill are really helpful. They will help individual families with childcare payments, and very many charities, particularly smaller and newer ones, will be helped by the new provisions on donations. The Bill certainly shows that the Government are listening. They have listened to all those stakeholders and charities. That is what we should be doing in government—it is absolutely right—as well as working towards making life run much more smoothly, particularly for those who really need it.
5.13 pm

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), who rightly says that there are practical and positive measures in the Bill that we should welcome. However, I believe that the Bill could have gone forward and been even more practical and positive and offered even more flexibility.

As the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) said earlier, she and I served on the Committee that considered the Small Charitable Donations Bill back in 2012. Indeed, the point about euros emerged as a reassurance to me, as I represent a border constituency in Northern Ireland. I pointed out that when a number of charities in my constituency raise money, whether with bucket collections or other ways such as church events, they find euros in their collections, and I asked whether they would have to sift them out or whether they could honestly declare them. In fairness, the then Minister, now the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, came forward with the clarification that that money could certainly all be counted.

The hon. Member for Clwyd South is right to say in that context that, when the 2012 Bill was being considered, the refusal to allow donations in the form of cheques or contactless or various other foreseeable electronic payments was odd. I wonder whether even now the Minister will consider allowing, in Committee, an enabling clause giving Ministers the power to permit payment by cheques and so on in future, so that these measures would not have to come back before the House. As the hon. Member for Amber Valley (Nigel Mills) said, he made that point in the Committee on the 2012 Bill.

In the Small Charitable Donations Act 2012, the Treasury was given significant powers to change things by order; it was given the power to change the connected charities amount, the community buildings amount, the remaining amount, and the capped total. It could amend the gift aid matching rule, abolish it, and reinstate it, if previously abolished, with or without amendment; it could even, by order, amend the meaning of “eligible charity”, and the limit on the value of individual donations. Sensibly, the Treasury was given the power to make significant working changes to the scheme by order. It seems strange that in this further bit of primary legislation there is not similar flexibility around, say, the use of cheques. That flexibility could be introduced in Committee.

I had the unusual experience of arriving in the 2012 Bill Committee to find that the Government had tabled an amendment to take up a point that I made on Second Reading. The penalty provisions stipulated that a charity that had suffered a penalty from HMRC would be barred from the scheme for a period, but there was no provision for an appeal against or possible overturn of the penalty, and where the penalty had been imposed but subsequently reviewed and set aside there was no provision to say that the period of barring would no longer apply. Sensibly, the Government listened.

That proved to me that sometimes, when it comes to small Bills, the Government have a flexible ear and will listen to points made on Second Reading; in the case of small Bills, they can handily concede points, and indeed take the initiative and leapfrog Committee Members in making sensible amendments.

The Minister was right to say that some sensible working adjustments are made in the Bill, but they are all ones that were advocated by members of the 2012 Public Bill Committee—not just by members of the Opposition, or by me, but in many cases by Conservative Members of the Committee. Members were teasing out the implications with practical ideas. Many of us were concerned that the Small Charitable Donations Bill was in danger of tilting into becoming the petty conditions Bill, given the number of different traditions, trips and traps that people could get into. I still wonder whether the Government could be a bit more generous or expansive in how they take the Bill forward. After all, it is clear that the whole matching requirement issue still causes charities problems. We should listen to charities as we take the Bill forward.

Susan Elan Jones: Does my hon. Friend remember that among the examples of charities that the small charitable donations scheme could help were small ones such as talking newspapers? We were very aware that if their admin staff were overburdened, they might not be able to claim what they should rightly claim.

Mark Durkan: Yes, the hon. Lady is exactly right. Members in all parts of the Committee raised many pertinent, practical examples of charities that we would want to be ready beneficiaries of the scheme, but that would be prohibited from taking part in it.

At the time, perhaps because this was a first move in this direction, the Minister took a narrow and highly precautionary approach, but smaller charities have not claimed the amount of small donations relief under the 2012 Act that the then Chancellor said they would; when he announced the scheme, he said that it would be £100 million. The indications to date are £25 million a year with an uplift of perhaps £15 million, going by what the Minister has said about the Bill, but we are still talking about something well short of what was promised to the charitable sector when the concept was introduced.

Our challenge is how to get closer to the £100 million. We have to look at the things that are standing in the way. I acknowledge that the Government, in the consultation and in the Bill, have moved to address some of the difficulties on community buildings, but there are still some issues on the question of connected charities. The matching requirement, however, is still there, and I wonder whether the Minister can tell us whether or not are examples of fraud in the gift aid small donations scheme in the past three years. Are there any indications of whether matching requirements would have prevented fraud, or simply prevented access to the scheme?

We want to know why the ministerial team are content with arriving at an amount that is only half the amount of support originally intended—in fact, it is less than half. I therefore hope that Ministers are prepared to continue to listen to hon. Members who serve on the Bill Committee and to the charitable sector so that we can improve the scheme and make it much more effective for all the causes and examples that hon. Members have discussed, including that and so on.

As well as amending the Small Charitable Donations Act 2012 the Bill amends the Childcare Payments Act 2014. In an intervention I said that the Minister rightly presented the childcare payments scheme under the Bill—with the original Act as the source—as applying to each child. However, the Government are inconsistent, because the childcare element of universal credit is
restricted to two children. Working tax credit rules apply to two children, but childcare payments under the 2014 Act are not restricted to two children. What is the reason for the Government’s cognitive dissonance? Why are there different rules on support for different families? The Minister explained how the provisions in the Bill ensure that changes can be met more responsibly by the system, but will Ministers consider the difference in experience and bureaucratic contact for parents accessing childcare payments under the Bill and the original Act and for parents who apply for the childcare element of universal credit? Under the childcare payments scheme, it is a bankable allowance, but it is not a bankable allowance for people on universal credit. They have to spend the money first, then claim it back within a short time. There is an unfair difference in treatment. Some parents are treated more generously and supportively in the way in which the system relates to them and engages with them than others, which is wrong. As legislators, we should try to ensure a more consistent approach to the principle of childcare in all the important and positive forms that it takes.

That is not to say that the childcare payments provided for are not positive and practical; I just wish that the universal credit childcare element could be made more comparable and, similarly, that if the Government see fit not to visit a two-child rule on the childcare payments system, they will abandon the idea of having such a rule for working family tax credit as well.

5.25 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan). He and I often have many common concerns at heart, and I echo a number of the points he has made today. I hope that Ministers will note that similar points are being made across the House today. Before saying anything more, I will follow the proper example set by my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) by declaring my interests. Not only am I a patron of a number of charities, but I am still the senior partner in a law firm that for over 25 years has had charity law as one of its specialisms.

Like many other Members who have spoken, I served on the Committee that scrutinised the Small Charitable Donations Bill in 2012, so I welcome the amendments set out in this Bill to make the donations scheme more effective and flexible for small charities, particularly new charities, and also to make it simpler. One reason I particularly welcome anything that makes running a charity simpler is that over the years I have had many clients in my law firm who have a brilliant idea for setting up a small charity but find it increasingly difficult to recruit people as officers, and particularly for the role of treasurer. I very much welcome anything that makes being the treasurer of a small charity easier.

The term “small charities” is something of a misnomer, because often it is those charities that pack the biggest punches. For example, there are a number of charities in my constituency who work to improve the local environment, and the extent of their contribution to local people’s enjoyment of that environment is staggering. I think of the Sandbach Woodland and Wildlife Group and Dane Valley Woods. Those two groups alone have improved acres of local countryside, public footpaths and areas for local people to enjoy. I also think of the friends of a number of railway stations in my constituency, such as Alsager station, Congleton station, Sandbach station and Goostrey station. Those groups are often the unsung heroes of our communities, yet they add so much to the enjoyment of our environment.

I also welcome the inclusion of community amateur sports clubs in the Bill, because their contribution to our communities can be substantial. They of course contribute to health and wellbeing, but they also strengthen community ties and foster a sense of belonging, particularly for children. I want to pay tribute to three clubs in my constituency, Triton hockey club, AFC Alsager and Alsager cricket club. They have been at the forefront of a successful campaign over several years to ensure that the former site of Manchester Metropolitan University in Alsager is reopened for use as a community sports facility. It is their dedication over many years, combined with their understanding of the community’s sporting needs and their contribution to encouraging literally thousands of young people to take up sports that has ensured the recent success of that campaign. I pay particular tribute to those groups this evening.

I welcome the Bill because, according to the Government’s figures, the take-up of the scheme we debated and then brought forward under the Small Charitable Donations Act in 2012 has been regrettably low—far beneath hoped-for levels, as has been said. In 2014–15, the Government budgeted £84 million for the scheme, but the actual spend was £21 million, which was a clear shortfall. The number of charities accessing the scheme was just under 20,000, far fewer than the 65,000 we would have expected if the £84 million spend had been achieved. I therefore very much welcome the Bill’s intention to increase take-up by simplifying the eligibility criteria, but I ask the Government to ensure that there is some real and effective promotion of the scheme once the Bill is passed, as I hope it will be.

I echo other Members’ requests that the Government look again at simply dropping the matching criteria—again, a most effective method of increasing uptake. As has been said, the eligibility requirements could be simplified to make them the same as those for gift aid, so that if the charity knows it is eligible for gift aid, it will be eligible to gain access to funds from the scheme. I understand that there have been concerns about fraud, which the Minister has expressed, but, again, I concur with other Members and ask what evidence there is of that. I am told by charities that there is actually little, if any, evidence that fraud has been a problem with the scheme or that the matching criteria have been effective at highlighting those intent on making fraudulent claims. Will Ministers review the issue, and provide any evidence in Committee? Alternatively, will they look at whether fraud is in reality a barrier to consideration of dropping the matching criteria altogether?

I draw the attention of the House to a joint survey by a number of groups. The Association of Independent Museums, the Charity Finance Group, the Institute of Fundraising, the National Council for Voluntary Organisations and the Small Charities Coalition surveyed more than 340 charities across a range of sizes, from those with fewer than 10 employees to those with more than 500. They found that the take-up of the current scheme in percentage terms was, as we would expect,
and as Members have indicated, far higher in very large organisations than in very small ones; in fact, it was 71% in large organisations, compared with 41% in smaller ones. While the sample was small, there is a clear indication that organisations at the smaller end of the spectrum use the scheme less frequently, so anything that can be done to assist them to access it is to be welcomed.

The charities were also polled on accessing information about the scheme. Some 22% of medium-sized organisations said they found it difficult to access information, and 26% of small organisations found it difficult or very difficult, but 41% of very small charities found it difficult or very difficult. That goes to show how important it is that the Government focus on the promotion of the scheme. Many survey respondents were still unaware of the scheme or that they could be eligible. It would be a far simpler message to charities if we simply said, “If you are registered for gift aid, you are eligible for the scheme.”

Let me touch on the issue of cheques. I concur with other Members and ask that the Government consider making small cheque donations, as well as contactless payments and cash donations, eligible for the scheme. I welcome the contactless payment proposal, but many donors—particularly elderly ones—still write cheques for £10 or £20. The logic behind allowing cheques to be included in the scheme is very similar to that for allowing contactless or small cash donations—namely, that it can be administratively burdensome to get declarations from cheque donors, particularly if those donations are irregular and small charities do not have the resources to chase up donors. Making such a change will arguably help small charities even more than allowing contactless payments to be included, because contactless technology is expensive. Small and local charities, perhaps set up by someone who has retired, may not possess the technical capability to process contactless payments, while they might very well receive a good number of cheques.

In conclusion, I suspect that most of my points are not novel—many have been raised this evening, or were raised with the Government during their consultation—but I hope it will be helpful for the House, and indeed for the thousands of charities in the country, if further reflection on such issues is conducted as the Bill travels through the House.

5.35 pm

David Warburton (Somerton and Frome) (Con): It is a pleasure to support a Bill that, although pretty straightforward and simple in outlook, as we have heard, is likely to have a significant impact on the small groups and charities that need it most.

In my constituency in Somerset, the uniquely spectacular levels of community spirit and the astonishing energy with which people are keen to help those around them mean that there is a huge number of such smaller charities, all inevitably fighting for survival. For them, not only every penny, but every second counts. Their time is also very precious. They do not have the capability or reach to spend hours sifting through accounts to satisfy various complex financial rules and regulations; they just want to get on with the job.

The simplification and easing of access to the benefits of the gift aid small donation scheme, as well as the more sensitive approach of the tax-free childcare scheme, are really to be welcomed—it sounds as though they are on both sides of the House. I am pleased that the extensive consultation that, as I understand it, went into putting the Bill together has resulted in a broadly positive reaction to the proposed changes from charities.

Of course, any step in any direction is only one step, and there may well be subsequent steps to take—there may well be more to add to the process—but we are taking a firm leap in the right direction for innumerable small organisations, and certainly for those fabulous and uniquely special organisations in my constituency.

The scrapping of the two-year rule and of the two-in-four requirement will make the environment far simpler and fairer for those charities—and not just for them, but of course for their workers and volunteers. It is worth mentioning that charitable giving, especially at this level, is often a very spontaneous gesture, and such spontaneity ought to be reflected in the gift aid scheme. That is exactly what the Bill sets out to achieve.

HMRC’s financial assessment of the reform suggests that 71,000 charities will benefit, which is a huge number, and that its receipts will decrease by some £15 million a year. We all of course feel great sadness for HMRC’s loss, but it is very nice when a decrease in revenues is used as a measure of success. That is not perhaps a principle to be applied more widely.

We have a Bill that makes the original intentions of the gift aid small donation scheme—its first aspirations—far closer to being realised. It is the Government’s duty to narrow the gap between what I have described as the astonishing and spectacular altruism up and down the country, but most particularly in Somerset, and the way in which that impulse is realised and felt by the charities and organisations in most need. The Bill will certainly go some way towards achieving that, and I therefore warmly welcome it.

Mr Ranile Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): It gives me great pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton), who made important points on how charities will be supported by the Bill. I commend my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) for saying that it is not just charities but churches that need our support, because churches, like charities, support communities across this country. It is good to support those who support others, and that is why I rise in support of the Bill.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne) said to the British people in his Budget at the start of the last Parliament, “Do the right thing for a charity, and the Government will do the right thing for you. It is a big help for the big society.”—[Official Report, 23 March 2011; Vol. 525, c. 962.]

I shall speak about how the Government could do even more to join up policy and deliver those objectives.

First, I should declare an interest as a member of the parochial church council in my village. I spoke to the gift aid administrator of the PCC, who said that the changes that the Government have introduced are more welcome and that things are working very well. That said, there is always more that can be done. These initiatives demonstrate that the Government are listening and that they want to help smaller organisations that
often raise money through loose change. It is therefore important that the Bill makes progress and is implemented. The current rules do not always deliver the policy intention; the Bill will certainly help to redress the balance for those charities that get lower allowances than others.

I should declare another interest, given my former employment at Lloyds Bank, because small donations by contactless payment will qualify from April 2017. Such modern fundraising is most welcome. That said, I cannot quite see sidesmen going up the aisle in my local church with contactless card machines or presenting such machines at the altar.

It is therefore important that the Government support cheques and do not repeal or adversely amend the Bills of Exchange Act 1882, as amended by subsequent Acts such as the Cheques Act 1957. It is important that cheques are retained as a method of payment. The Payments Council—the institution set up by the banks—must be under no illusion about the Government’s intention to protect cheques as a way for people to give money. We should surely be in favour of people giving money to charities, churches and worthy organisations however they wish to do so. It is an honourable intention and something that the Government should support.

Turning to tax-free childcare, it is good that we are making childcare more affordable. Tax-free childcare was legislated for in the Childcare Payments Act 2014 in the last Parliament. It is good that we are enabling people who wish to work or to take up more work to do so. That said, I have two suggestions for the Government. The first relates to the marriage allowance, which the previous Government also introduced. Just as the Government top up £2 for every £8 in this initiative, I suggest that they should do more to support families where only one spouse is in work.

As families need to pay for childcare, I urge the Government to look at an area of childcare policy allied to this one—the 30 hours of free nursery care. Whether paid or free, nursery care must be of the highest quality. My concern is that, whether or not people take advantage of the tax-free childcare available, the national average cost intended for the 30 hours of free childcare is less than £5 an hour. That is not sufficient in rural areas with small nurseries, given the high cost of rent and so on.

I urge the Government to think about these policies in the round. The intentions are all admirable. Should the scheme progress as planned, perhaps the tax-free childcare provision could help to top up the 30 hours. That is not currently allowed. At present, if a nursery’s costs exceed the amount it will get from the taxpayer it has to bear those costs itself. Allowing people who have contributed, and have been supported through the tax system to pay for more childcare, to top up—whether because of a high-cost nursery, because they want more hours, or for some other reason—would be a very helpful initiative. I suggest that introducing further flexibility into the system is the way to go.

That said, I fully support the Bill’s intentions. I look forward to its progress through the House and hope that the Minister will deal with some of the points I have raised in due course.

5.47 pm

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): My hon. Friend is giving an excellent speech. Does he agree that the key point to remember is that churches are not just places of worship on a Sunday but living, breathing parts of the community?
For example, the Living Room initiative at St Mary Magdalene church in my constituency provides tea, coffee and bacon sandwiches for many people who have nowhere else to go.

Michael Tomlinson: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend, who makes an excellent point. The Bill will help all groups—not just church groups, but many others—in reclaiming gift aid and slimming down bureaucracy. I warmly welcome the Bill’s aim of further reducing bureaucracy by, for example, getting rid of the two-year rule. That will help new charities enormously and will encourage those thinking of setting up charities to do so.

Maggie Throup (Erewash) (Con): My hon. Friend makes an important point about cutting bureaucracy and time. Often, small charities rely on volunteers, whose time is far better spent out there promoting the charity rather than dealing with paperwork and red tape. The Bill will be very welcome in his constituency, as I am sure he will explain.

Michael Tomlinson: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s timely intervention and will come to exactly that point in one or two moments.

My hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) mentioned sport. As a keen sportsman, I warmly welcome the fact that the policy will be open and available for amateur sports clubs. That is very much a step in the right direction.

I want to mention one charity in my constituency, Waggy Tails Rescue. It does not rival the Minister’s Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, but it does play an important part in the constituency of Mid Dorset and North Poole as a dog rescue charity that re-homes dogs in east Dorset and west Hampshire. I had the pleasure of visiting it in the recent past and it explained the difficulties of being a small charity and facing the bureaucracy that can be involved. As my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Maggie Throup) mentioned, such charities have few if any professional staff, and therefore the more time they can spend undertaking charitable works rather than carrying out bureaucratic office functions, the better.

One concern or criticism is whether enough awareness has been raised. I suspect that each of us as Members of Parliament can play our own part in raising the profile and awareness of the scheme.

I warmly welcome the childcare payments measure. This has not been mentioned during the debate, but the Bill will open the scheme up to parents who are self-employed. As someone who was self-employed, I often felt left out of tax schemes in the past. The measure will be warmly welcomed by those in the community who are self-employed, but perhaps I could invite the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Mr Wilson), to say how he will raise awareness so that all families who are eligible can take up that excellent scheme.

5.52 pm

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow so many fantastic contributions from Members on both sides of the House, especially my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson), who relayed his personal experience.

I am pleased that the Bill seeks to simplify and increase access to the gift aid small donations scheme, which has been criticised by some charity bodies for being too difficult for small charities to access. By scrapping the 2012 requirement that charities must have made successful gift aid claims in at least two of the previous four years, the Bill will enable newly formed charities to access the gift aid scheme. That will be especially helpful for volunteers working for charities when they have less administrative experience and smaller charitable organisations.

I am pleased that broadening the scheme will allow charities to make an additional claim in respect of donations raised as part of charitable activities in community buildings.

Michelle Donelan: Does my hon. Friend agree that the scrapping of the two-year rule will prove invaluable for new charities, because it is in their first few years that they either succeed or fail? I am the trustee of a charity in Chippenham called Helping Victims of Domestic Violence. It is flourishing but overcame a number of problems in its first few years and would have benefited invaluable from the measure.

Chris Green: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. In that sense, charities are a little bit like small businesses. The most challenging time for both is at the beginning.

The Bill gives freedom of movement for charities such as churches, meaning that donations do not necessarily have to be made on the site of the church for the gift aid scheme to apply.

Like many constituencies, mine boasts many charitable organisations that do fantastic work for the community. I should take this opportunity to thank them all for their work. I have always appreciated the various different charities in and around my constituency but it was only when I became a Member of Parliament did I appreciate how much work is done. The Herwich Community Working Together event, which involved 50 different charitable organisations coming together to share ideas and best practice, was such an eye-opener. Westhoughton Community Network is another fantastic organisation that works to bring together different charitable organisations to share that experience and knowledge, and to stand in solidarity with one another.

Maggie Throup: When my hon. Friend goes to different events across his constituency, does he find that the same people represent a number of different charities? The Bill will make it easier for them to give even more back to their communities. I come across constituents who are members of the Canal & River Trust as well as the Rotary— it goes on and on. Does he agree that groups of charities in his constituency will benefit in the same way?

Chris Green: Absolutely; I agree entirely. I was just thinking about the fantastic work done, often in hazardous conditions, by the Bolton Mountain Rescue Team. It is not just the team itself that raises money. Rotary clubs and other organisations raise a lot of money for them, too. Civic society is so important. We ought not always rely on central or local government to do everything for us. We ought to look to civic society for many important things in our daily lives. By celebrating, recognising and
communicating that as widely as possible, we provide the opportunity for more people to hear about such work and get involved in these organisations. Recently, I worked a shift in the local Bolton Hospice Macmillan Cancer Support shop. Little did I realise how much effort and organisation goes into them. The relationship between the volunteers and professionals is also fantastic. Professionals in charities are able to provide continuity and a political edge.

**Kevin Foster:** My hon. Friend talks about how charities are supported by volunteers and professionals working together. The Torbay Community Development Trust supports a number of small charities by providing an administration hub. The Bill will reduce administration, but there will still be a need for this kind of support so that volunteers can get on with the job that they want to do.

**Chris Green:** I agree entirely. That support network is often vital and it really sustains people. People who run charities can think they are in a uniquely difficult place, so it makes it so much easier if they can share ideas and overcome problems. Colleagues have talked about the importance of communication and awareness. Local media have a key role in communicating these changes. I am looking forward to the “Wearing it Pink” event for breast cancer awareness, which will take place on a week on Friday. I have been assured that there will be a pink buffet with pink marshmallows and pink drinks. I just haven’t decided what to wear. If hon. Members have any ideas, please let me know. I am sure the whole House would like to wish them well.

The Bill will allow charities to claim gift aid from contactless payments of £20 or less. This respects the modern way in which people now pay and donate to charities. The scheme is not a replacement for gift aid itself. It is important that gifts are made in person to retain the local link, as required by the scheme. It is important, too, to recognise that £20 is a reasonable amount of money. It is not excessive. I think that for most people £20 will be seen as a reasonable small donation. Keeping in mind the sense of a country that works for everyone, I am more than happy to support the Bill.

5.59 pm

**Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab):** May I begin by thanking all hon. Members who have made such valuable contributions to today’s debate? There were 11, alongside interventions, starting with the right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman), who talked about her involvement in the setting up of charities and the challenge she had in worshipping at the same time as filling out an envelope. She also talked about the demographic discrimination in relation to cheques and the need for them to be included in these proposals.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) welcomed the measures, but again raised the plurality of methods of giving and the challenges faced by smaller charities, which these proposals do not assist with. The hon. Member for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) managed to get his wife, his mother-in-law and a shovel into his speech, which was an achievement, but importantly he also raised the issue of cheques, SMS messages and people’s ability to give the money into the charitable system through a plurality of methods of giving.

My hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones) talked about the importance of supporting charities and the improvements that the Bill may bring and, again, raised the question of cheques as a way forward. The hon. Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), who is not in the Chamber, referred to the bucket shaking that she does regularly and applauded those who go out collecting for various charities. She also welcomed the simplification introduced by these proposals.

The hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) also talked about the flexibility of methods of giving that are not in the Bill. He, too, pushed that issue. The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) also talked about the need for cheques and the ability of older people to participate by giving cheques. The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton), worshiping in his church, welcomed the simplification and the spontaneity in giving, as did the hon. Member for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena), who again had a challenge: could the church get a contactless machine up the aisle at the same time as worshipping? That seems to have been a theme today. The hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson) talked about the Great Santa fun run raising thousands of pounds and, touching everyone’s heart, the Wuggy Tails Rescue dog re-homing charity.

We on the Labour Benches want to thank the charitable sector for all the remarkable work it does for all the communities we represent. Without its valuable role, many services in our communities would simply not exist, so the Opposition are broadly supportive of the content of the Bill. As such, I will keep my closing comments fairly brief. My hon. Friend the Member for Worlesley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) has already made reference to our concern that loosening the eligibility criteria could increase the risk of fraud. That is important. The fact that a charity would not need to be registered for two years raises the question of whether just about anyone could set up a charity and relatively easily receive £2,000 of taxpayers’ money. That is an important point, so does the Minister have any figures on the amount of fraud that has taken place in the gift aid small donations scheme thus far?

The question of the risk of fraud is extremely important, given the inadequacy of the regulation of charity taxation. We hear about Government funds being mismanaged in elements of the charity sector or about charities being set up merely for the purpose of tax avoidance.

**Kevin Foster:** Does the shadow Minister agree that the call should be to ensure that the appropriate due diligence must be undertaken in new charity registrations, in particular by the Charity Commission, before a charity registration number is issued? I take on board his point about potential fraud via this scheme, but of course any charity being registered can start collecting and we need the public to have that confidence.

**Peter Dowd:** I completely understand that. At the end of the day, the process has to be sufficiently robust to ensure that fraud does not exist.
In that regard, the Charity Commission has identified the estimated levels of abuse, mismanagement, fraud and money laundering in charities today, in a succession of reports entitled “Tackling abuse and mismanagement.” It has identified an increase in the incidence of fraud in relation to charities, and a range of cases in which the commission gave evidence in criminal prosecutions, including against trustees who stole £350,000 from a charity for the relief of the people of Afghanistan, which is shocking. The number of compliance cases brought by the commission almost quadrupled between 2012 and 2013, demonstrating both that the commission needs our support and that we ought not be complacent. In that light, when proposed legislative changes come before the House, it is incumbent on us all to be vigilant. I do not want to rain on the party, but we need to be vigilant.

The problem is not just straightforward crime. There is something worrying in our corporate and tax-avoidance cultures that see charities as a means of making money. In recent years, a prime example is the Cup Trust, about which the Public Accounts Committee produced a damning report in 2013, while there was a judgment in the High Court earlier this year about the same issue. The report summarised:

“Despite its declared charitable aims, it is clear that the Trust was set up as a tax avoidance scheme by people known to be in the business of tax avoidance.”

In the meantime, the Cup Trust has claimed gift aid of £46 million. Regrettably, such tax-avoidance schemes are not isolated. As Professor Alastair Hudson, an expert on these matters, put it:

“There is something about the ‘goodness’ associated with charities, which made people reluctant to investigate or to criticise them.”

It is worth noting that when Northern Rock collapsed in 2007, it came to light for the first time that the bank had created a corporate structure known as “Granite”. This included what has been explained by academic commentators as a discretionary trust involving a small charity in South Shields among its beneficiaries. It appears that the charity was named without its knowledge. Moreover, it appears that the only purpose of this structure was to be “tax-efficient”. The presence of the charity in the structure appears to have been unconnected to working “for the public benefit”. We cannot be complacent about the law on charities, while that sort of activity is considered to be an ordinary part of corporate life. While tax avoidance is legal, it is, as Lord Denning said, “not yet a virtue.”

Of the 164,000 charities in the UK, a large number still do not lodge accounts with the regulators. It is difficult to know whether they are moribund, carrying on work “for the public benefit”, or being used for other less charitable purposes, so to speak. That does charities no good at all—and we need to protect them. Even the highest-profile charities such as Kids Company can be sources of mismanagement and bad financial practice. Notwithstanding the best intentions of these proposals—namely, the loosening of eligibility criteria—it is vital that sufficient safeguards are in place to prevent fraud when Government funding or tax breaks are provided, as in this case, to the charity sector. I think that sentiment would get cross-party support.

That said, and as I indicated earlier, we are broadly supportive of the measures contained in the Small Charitable Donations and Childcare Payments Bill and we will not oppose it on Second Reading. We will, however, seek to improve the Bill in Committee next week, and I hope that the Government will support us in that.

6.8 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr Rob Wilson): I think you will agree, Mr Speaker, that this has been an entertaining and enlightening debate. Speaking as the Minister with responsibility for civil society, it is always encouraging to hear right hon. and hon. Members share examples of the excellent work they see being done by charities throughout the country.

I would like to thank those who spoke in the debate: my hon. Friends the Members for Bolton West (Chris Green), for North East Hampshire (Mr Jayawardena) for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton) and for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson); the hon. Member for Clwyd South (Susan Elan Jones); my hon. Friends the Members for Rochford and Southend East (James Duddridge) and for Congleton (Fiona Bruce); the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan); my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) and my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow). I am also grateful for the Front-Bench contributions. We can be extraordinarily proud of our strong and diverse charity sector. That is why building an environment in which a modern and resilient charity sector can thrive remains a priority for this Government.

The Government already provide significant support to our charity sector. They do so through generous tax reliefs and grants to support good causes, but also through contracts and payments for services. Indeed, the National Council for Voluntary Organisations reports that in 2013-14 the charity sector received £1.5 billion from Government bodies, with 81% coming from contracts and fees.

The Government have developed the world’s leading social investment market to support charities and social enterprises. We have established Big Society Capital, and are in the process of providing it with £600 million of start-up capital in partnership with the UK’s banks. We have set up the Access Foundation with more than £50 million to allow access to the social investment market, and we have introduced social investment tax relief, which is set to unlock nearly half a billion pounds’ worth of investment over the next five years.

As my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary said in her opening speech, the Government support charities and donors through a substantial package of tax reliefs, worth more than £5 billion last year. Almost £1.8 billion of that comes in the form of business rate relief on charities’ premises. A further £300 million is provided in VAT relief, and £280 million is received from relief on stamp duty land tax. In addition, donors are encouraged to give more to good causes through tax relief on gifts and bequests, and that is worth nearly £1.3 billion every year.

Kevin Foster: The Minister mentions the benefit to charities of what are effectively business rate exemptions. Has he had a chance to look into the possible impact on the figure he mentions of the revaluation that has just been announced, which will take effect on 1 April next year?
Mr Wilson: I have not had a chance to look into it myself, but I am sure that the Financial Secretary will be happy to speak to my hon. Friend after the debate.

Mr Wilson: As my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary said earlier, an outreach team in the Treasury is working on face-to-face presentations. So far, 650 charities have taken up that opportunity, and it has increased take-up. The feedback from the sector has been extremely positive, but we will continue to work on awareness and take-up with representative bodies in the charity sector. We are also launching a local charities day, which we hope will take place in December. That will provide a good opportunity to profile what local charities are contributing, and to ensure that awareness of the small donations scheme is at the forefront of their minds.

The Bill is a culmination of months of consultation and constructive discussion with the charity sector, and I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the hundreds of charities, umbrella bodies and others that took the time to engage with the Government during the development of the Bill. Our engagement with the sector will not end with the conclusion of this review, however. A number of charities told us that a lack of understanding can contribute to unclaimed gift aid. We will therefore continue to work closely with charities and sector representatives to raise awareness of both gift aid and the small donations scheme, to maximise the relief claimed on eligible donations.

A number of hon. Members raised the matching rule, and I would like to take the time to go through that in a little more detail. I know that the hon. Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) was particularly exercised by the proposed changes. This tax relief rightly benefits charities established and run by honest, committed people who are motivated to do good and who work hard for their beneficiaries. Unfortunately, the generous nature of these tax reliefs also attracts a dishonest minority who seek to exploit charitable status for criminal purposes. HMRC works closely with the Charity Commission for England and Wales, the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland and the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator to protect our charity sector from those unscrupulous individuals. In 2015, more than 275 suspicious activity referrals were passed between HMRC and the charity regulators for further investigation.

Unlike gift aid, the gift aid small donations scheme does not provide a full audit trail to allow HMRC to link donations back to a specific named donor. The gift aid small donations scheme is therefore much more vulnerable than gift aid to fraud. That is why it is necessary to operate gift aid alongside the small donations scheme, so that we can best protect the scheme against fraud and exploitation by ensuring that funds are used only to support the important work done by bona fide charities. Public trust in charities has already declined due to poor fundraising practices. We really must ensure that, with the small donations scheme, we do not leave the door open to any future scandal and its consequent impact on public trust and confidence. I am sure that all hon. Members across the House will agree with me on that.

Kirsty Blackman: On the point about charities acting fraudulently, does the Minister not see that the charities that could benefit the most from the change to the matching rule are those that earn very small amounts of money, such as £500 or £1,000 a year? That is not going to cost the Treasury a massive amount of money, and there would not be a risk of massive financial fraud.

Mr Wilson: I want to stay on the subject of fraud, because we must guard carefully against it in the legislation. It might sound as though we are opening up quite small pockets of money, but when we put them all together, they add up to a much bigger total. The figures relating to the gift aid small donation scheme are not available in isolation. However, it is an unfortunate fact that unscrupulous individuals seek to exploit charitable status for criminal purposes. In May this year, three individuals were jailed for a total of 22 years for defrauding HMRC for criminal purposes. In May this year, three individuals were jailed for a total of 22 years for defrauding HMRC for criminal purposes. In May this year, three individuals were jailed for a total of 22 years for defrauding HMRC for criminal purposes. In May this year, three individuals were jailed for a total of 22 years for defrauding HMRC for criminal purposes. In May this year, three individuals were jailed for a total of 22 years for defrauding HMRC for criminal purposes. In May this year, three individuals were jailed for a total of 22 years for defrauding HMRC for criminal purposes.

In January this year, two individuals were jailed for a total of five years for attempting fraudulently to claim £500,000 in gift aid from HMRC. That is a really important point to make. We must make sure that this small donations scheme is not open to fraudulent activities.
The Bill removes two of the existing eligibility criteria that help HMRC to assess compliance with the wider gift aid scheme—the two-year registration requirement and the gift aid history requirement. The Government initially consulted on relaxing the gift aid history requirement to only one year rather than two. However, after listening to the views of the sector we have taken the decision to remove that requirement entirely, which is a significant simplification for charities. It is therefore necessary to retain the match-funding rule as a means of protecting the integrity of the scheme. As the Financial Secretary said in her opening comments, the scheme was always intended to be linked with the wider gift aid scheme, and the Government made that clear in 2012 and that remains the case today.

It is important to be clear that the gift aid matching requirement is not intended to disadvantage smaller charities. That is why the rule is progressive and is set at a modest ratio of 10:1. This means that a charity needs only to claim gift aid on donations of £10 to gain a small donations scheme allowance of £100. To benefit from the maximum small donations allowance, a charity must collect gift aid donations of just £800. Most would see that as a reasonable position to take. Requiring charities to match a proportion of their small donations with a small amount of gift aid donations incentivises charities to maximise their gift aid claims.

Unlike the small donations scheme, gift aid relief is not capped, relief can be claimed on donations of any size and it is not limited to small cash donations. Furthermore, the process of obtaining a gift aid declaration allows charities to develop ongoing relationships with their donors and can lead to a more resilient funding stream in the longer term. In terms of awareness for charities as well, the Government have funded the small charities fundraising training programme, which is worth more than £100,000. The Government appointed the Foundation for Social Improvement in partnership with the Small Charities Coalition and GlobalGiving UK as training providers to help charities with an annual income of up to £1 million to fundraise much more effectively than they have done in the past.

The hon. Member for Clwyd South asked why the matching ratio was set at 10:1. During the passage of the Bill in 2012, the matching rule was originally set at 1:1, but that was reduced to 10:1 after listening to representatives from the sector.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden asked about gift aid and SMS donations. SMS text giving is a really easy way for donors to give to charity. Donors simply send a short code to a six-digit number to donate a set amount via their phone bill. There is an established process for donors’ gift aid SMS donations. Following the initial message, a reply is sent to the donor thanking them for their donations and asking for their name, house number, postcode and confirmation that they are a UK taxpayer. If the donor replies with that information, gift aid is added to the donation.

We also had a question about why cheques were not allowed. The aim of the gift aid small donations scheme is to allow charities and community amateur sports clubs to claim a gift aid style payment on cash donations received in circumstances where it is difficult or impractical to collect donors’ details. Giving by cheque means that the donor is giving their details to the charity and the extra amount of information needed to make a gift aid declaration is therefore relatively small. If it is practical for a donor to write a cheque, it seems reasonable to assume that it is practical for a donor to make a gift aid declaration.

I will briefly cover contactless debit and credit cards, because those donations face the same fundamental problem—a lack of opportunity for charities to stop and engage with their donors. Anyone who has passed through a tube station ticket barrier at rush hour will be able to attest to the speed of contactless technology, allowing individuals to tap their card to pay and walk through without breaking their stride.

I am very grateful to representatives of Cancer Research UK who took the time during the Government’s recent consultation to demonstrate a prototype contactless donation terminal currently being piloted by a number of large UK charities. These terminals, which are set to fixed donation amounts, allow individuals to donate quickly and easily in a similar way to donating cash. Extending the small donations scheme to include these types of donation will future-proof the scheme, allowing more charities to benefit as the technology becomes widely available.

We had a fairly lively discussion about the cost of child care and the importance of Government support for hard-working families. I hope that we can all agree that the amendments within the Bill are positive, making it easy for parents to access help with the cost of child care. I also hope that my right hon. and hon. Friends from all parties in the House can join me in welcoming the imminent introduction of tax-free child care. This new scheme will provide much-needed support with child care costs for the first time to working parents who are self-employed as well as those who are employed.

The Bill will make the gift aid small donations scheme more flexible and generous so that it can benefit a greater number of charities and donations. It will also make it easier for parents to access tax-free child care. It is good news for civil society and good news for working parents, and I hope that all hon. Members will join me in supporting it. It is a Bill to make life simpler and easier for charities and working parents, and I commend it to the House.

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

SMALL CHARITABLE DONATIONS AND CHILDCARE PAYMENTS BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)), That the following provisions shall apply to the Small Charitable Donations and Childcare Payments Bill:

Committal

The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee

Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 18 October 2016.

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

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

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

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

Other proceedings

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.—(Jane Ellison.)

Question agreed to.

SMALL CHARITABLE DONATIONS AND Childcare PAYMENTS 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 Small Charitable Donations and Childcare Payments Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—(Jane Ellison.)

Question agreed to.

Standing Orders and Select Committees

6.27 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Lidington): I beg to move,

That, with effect from 17 October 2016, the following amendments and related provisions be made in respect of Standing Orders:

A: Select Committees Related to Government Departments

(1) That Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended in the Table in paragraph (2), in item 1, by leaving out “Innovation and Skills” in each place it occurs and inserting “Energy and Industrial Strategy”.

B: Related Provisions

(2) That all proceedings of the House and of its select committees in this Parliament relating to the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee shall be read and have effect as if they had been done in relation to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, including for the purposes of calculating any period under Standing Order No. 122A (Term limits for chairs of select committees).

C: Liaison Committee

(3) That the Resolution of the House of 10 September 2015 (Liaison Committee (Membership)) be amended, in paragraph (2), by leaving out “Innovation and Skills” and inserting “Energy and Industrial Strategy”.

D: European Committees

(4) That the Table in paragraph (7) of Standing Order No. 119 (European Committees) be amended in respect of European Committee C, by leaving out “Innovation and Skills” and inserting “Energy and Industrial Strategy”.

It might be for the convenience of the House if, in speaking briefly to motion 6, I say a little about the other motions, since they all relate to each other. Motions 6 to 11 seek to change the arrangements in the Standing Orders of the House for Select Committees, following the recent changes to the machinery of government. First, they change the name of the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee. Secondly, they remove references in Standing Orders to the Energy and Climate Change Committee. Thirdly, they introduce two new Select Committees for International Trade and on Exiting the European Union. The motions also allocate the Chair of the EU Exit Committee to Labour and the Chair of the International Trade Committee to the Scottish National party.

The changes allow for the usual notice periods applying to elections of Select Committee Chairs to be disappplied, and they enable you, Mr Speaker, to announce a date for an election of Chairs before 20 October, since the House has already been without effective Select Committees in these areas for quite a long time.

Question put and agreed to.

STANDING ORDERS ETC. (MACHINERY OF GOVERNMENT CHANGES) (ENERGY AND CLIMATE CHANGE)

Resolved,

That, with effect from 17 October 2016, the following amendments and related provisions be made in respect of Standing Orders:

A: Select Committees Related to Government Departments

(1) That Standing Order No. 152 (Select committees related to government departments) be amended in the Table in paragraph (2) by leaving out item 6.

B: Liaison Committee

(2) That the Resolution of the House of 10 September 2015 (Liaison Committee (Membership)) be amended, in paragraph (2), by leaving out “Energy and Climate Change.”
C: European Committees

(3) That the Table in paragraph (7) of Standing Order No. 119 (European Committees) be amended in respect of European Committee A, by leaving out “Energy and Climate Change”.

D: Planning: National Policy Statements

(4) That paragraph (7)(a)(i) of Standing Order No. 145 (Liaison Committee) be amended by leaving out “Energy and Climate Change”.

(5) That paragraph (2) of Standing Order No. 152H (Planning: national policy statements) be amended by leaving out “Energy and Climate Change”.—(Mr Lidington.)

STANDING ORDERS ETC. (MACHINERY OF GOVERNMENT CHANGES) (EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION)

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, with effect from 17 October 2016 and for the remainder of this Parliament, the following changes be made to Standing Orders; and that such changes shall cease to have effect upon the lapse or repeal of the temporary Standing Order on the Committee on Exiting the European Union:

A: Committee on Exiting the European Union

(1) There shall be a select committee, to be called the Committee on Exiting the European Union, to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Department for Exiting the European Union and related matters falling within the responsibilities of associated public bodies.

(2) The committee shall consist of no more than twenty-one Members including:

(a) the chair; and

(b) no more than twenty other Members who shall be nominated upon a motion made on behalf of the Committee of Selection as set out in Standing Order No. 121 (Nomination of select committees); and the provisions of Standing Order No. 121(2) shall apply to motions for the nomination and discharge of Members to and from the committee as if it were a committee not established under a temporary standing order.

(3) Unless the House otherwise orders, each Member nominated to the committee shall continue to be a member of it for the remainder of the Parliament.

(4) The committee shall have the power to appoint a sub-committee.

(5) The committee and any sub-committee appointed by it shall have the assistance of the Counsel to the Speaker.

(6) The committee and any sub-committee appointed by it shall have power to appoint legal advisers, and specialist advisers either to supply information which is not readily available or to elucidate matters of complexity within the committee's order of reference.

(7) The committee and any sub-committee appointed by it shall have power to send for persons, papers and records, to sit notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, to adjourn from place to place and to report from time to time the evidence taken before them.

(8) The quorum of the committee shall be six and the quorum of any sub-committee appointed by it shall be three.

(9) The committee shall have power to report from time to time, and any sub-committee appointed by it shall have power to report to the committee from time to time.

B: Election of Select Committee Chairs

(10) That Standing Order No. 122B (Election of select committee chairs) be amended in paragraph (1), by inserting, in the appropriate place, “the Committee on Exiting the European Union”.

C: Liaison Committee

(11) That the Resolution of the House of 10 September 2015 (Liaison Committee (Membership)) be amended, in paragraph (2), by inserting, in the appropriate place, “Exiting the European Union”.

D: European Committees

(12) That Standing Order No. 119 (European Committees) be amended as follows:

(a) in paragraph (4) by inserting after “departments)” the words “, or the Committee on Exiting the European Union”; and

(b) in the Table in paragraph (7), in respect of European Committee B, by inserting, in the appropriate place, “Exiting the European Union”.

E: European Scrutiny Committee

(13) That paragraph (12) of Standing Order No. 143 (European Scrutiny Committee) be amended by inserting, in the appropriate place, “the Committee on Exiting the European Union”.

F: Public Bodies: Draft Orders

(14) That Standing Order No. 152K (Public bodies: draft orders) be amended as follows:

(a) after sub-paragraph (b) to paragraph (1) to insert “(c) in respect of a draft order laid by a Minister in the Department for Exiting the European Union, the Committee on Exiting the European Union”; and

(b) in paragraph (2) by inserting after “departments)” the words “, or the Committee on Exiting the European Union”.

G: Positions for which Additional Salaries are Payable for the Purposes of Section 4a(2) of the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009

(15) That the Order of the House of 19 March 2013 (Positions for which additional salaries are payable for the purposes of section 4a(2) of the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009) be amended, in paragraph (1)(a), by inserting, in the appropriate place, “the Committee on Exiting the European Union”.—(Mr Lidington.)

6.29 pm

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): The Leader of the House has just told us that we have been without Select Committees to oversee international trade and Brexit. As Chair of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs, I take some mild exception to that remark, because the Foreign Affairs Committee, along with a number of other Select Committees, has been working on Brexit. Indeed, on 26 April, we produced a unanimous report on the implications of whether the United Kingdom chose to stay or leave the European Union. With a Committee split down the middle, that was a remarkable piece of work, and I hope that it served to give Members a definitively unbiased account to present to their constituents before the referendum. Subsequent to the referendum, we produced a further report, in which we were particularly critical of the Government’s failure—indeed, their instruction to Departments to do no contingency planning at all in the event that the country voted to leave the EU.

I wrote to the Government Chief Whip on 30 August and copied the letter to the Leader of the House, the Clerk of the House and the Clerk of Committees to make clear my unease about the discussion then going on about the formation of a Select Committee to oversee the Department for Exiting the European Union. I would like to take this opportunity to put my concerns on the record, as I suspect that such a Committee is likely to be set up, given the arrangements that have
been made. I want what I might call the gypsy’s warning about how the Committee might work to be on the record.

Our departure from the EU will generate unprecedented constitutional, political and economic challenges that will affect every Department and almost all aspects of Government policy. Effective scrutiny of this process and the new Department tasked with managing it should require a made-to-measure response from the House. That response should have been to prioritise flexibility, adaptability and cost-effectiveness. I believe that what we are presented with this evening is a mistake in setting up a classic departmental Select Committee to oversee what is in a sense a project that is being organised through a Department of State but that is in the end a time-limited project that will almost certainly come to a conclusion by the end of March 2019.

The Department for Exiting the European Union is unlike any other Department. It will not originate or develop any discrete domestic policy area, and as I said, its task is time-limited. Overseeing it with a discrete Select Committee will ensure that the House is probably about six months behind the Department. No doubt, the Committee will produce reports on the Department after it has ceased to exist. The Department’s website says that it will be “responsible for policy work to support United Kingdom negotiations”, but in practice, existing Departments will have key roles in setting policy aims for when we leave the EU and be involved in the planning of how we achieve them.

The role of the Department for Exiting the European Union will be to oversee those negotiations and to ensure consistency and coherence across the Government. We already have existing Select Committees that have the understanding and expertise needed to hold Departments to account for their progress in preparing for Brexit. Several Committees have already launched Brexit-based inquiries, building on work conducted in advance of the referendum. Scrutiny of the Department’s oversight and cross-Government co-ordination role would in these circumstances fall rather more naturally to the Liaison Committee and the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. Select Committees could also, of course, work alongside one another, pooling resources and expertise.

There are also the resources available through the European Scrutiny Committee, which could adapt its role to go beyond simply examining European Union documents, but the House will badly need its expertise when examining the future regulatory framework beyond Brexit; that will present significant opportunities for Parliament, given the inevitable lack of clarity on what will apply in advance of the negotiations.

The Foreign Affairs Committee already oversees the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Given the likely impact, in the short and long term, on the FCO, it would make perfect sense for the Foreign Affairs Committee to take this work.

Of course, prior to the referendum, my Committee proved itself to be balanced in its assessment of the United Kingdom’s options. Any new Committee that we set up is likely to be highly partisan on the subject of Brexit, and whether this will lend itself to effective scrutiny, rather than conflict with the Government’s stated policy on Brexit, is frankly open to doubt. Setting up a special Select Committee with 21 members, rather than the normal 11, with the costs that involves, in terms of staff and member time, also disturbs the balance in the allocation of Committee chairmanships between the parties. I am aware that the resources available to my Committee are likely to be significantly reduced in order to service this new Select Committee.

The fundamental question that the House ought to address is whether the new Committee will improve our scrutiny, or instead duplicate the work of existing Committees, as was suggested by a senior figure at the Institute for Government. The new Committee will impose an extra layer of demands on the already hard-pressed Ministers in the Department for Exiting the European Union and their officials. My view, shared by the European Union Committee in the other place in its first report of this Session, is that the existing structures of the House would serve us best.

As I acknowledged at the beginning of my remarks, I suspect that I am in a significant minority, so I do not intend to press this matter, unless I suddenly find that my arguments have surprisingly convinced a majority of those present. I invite my right hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) to explain to me and the House why the concerns that I have expressed will not come to pass, and how we can ensure that this new Select Committee, despite my concerns, will be able to work in a way that does not bring it into automatic conflict with the Government, rather than being an exercise of oversight, or into conflict with existing Select Committees of the House.

Mr Speaker: We are debating this motion separately. If the Leader of the House wants to respond briefly to the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt), he is of course welcome to do so.

6.38 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Lidington): I am grateful. May I first say to my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) that the Government, in bringing forward this motion, have absolutely no intention of in any way denigrating or downplaying the work that he and the members of the Foreign Affairs Committee and other departmental Select Committees have done, or continue to do, on European affairs? Of course, all those departmental Select Committees will continue to have oversight of the European Union responsibilities exercised by the Departments that they shadow. Indeed, scrutiny of those elements of Departments’ business has always been an integral part of the responsibility of those Select Committees.

When the Chief Whip and I received the letter from my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate, we considered seriously the proposal that he made. It is true, as he
said, that the Government’s intention is that the Department for Exiting the European Union should endure only as long as that work needs to be carried out. In the end, we concluded that there was merit in the long-established principle that each Government Department should have a Select Committee to which Ministers and, through them, the officials in that Department are accountable. I refer my hon. Friend to the wording of the motion, which refers to the Select Committee being responsible for scrutinising “the expenditure, administration and policy of the Department for Exiting the European Union.”

Given the breadth of policy areas that the new Department covers there would be a lack of clarity and lines of accountability if we tried to spread not just policy but expenditure and the administration of the Department among a number of departmental Select Committees, each having a finger in the European pie.

I would briefly make two more points. First, it remains the case that Select Committees can carry out joint inquiries. I believe that the report delivered to the Liaison Committee in the last Parliament by our former colleague, Lord Beith, advocated changes to Standing Orders that would make the co-option of a small number of members of a Select Committee to another for a particular inquiry easier to organise. Secondly, I understand what my hon. Friend said about the risks of partisanship, but the history of Select Committees shows that they are most effective when they can deliver a consensual report. It will be for the members of the new Select Committee to decide how they conduct their business, but they will go into this work knowing that their reports will carry greater weight both with the Government and with the wider public if they achieve a consensus, as the best Select Committees, including his own, have been able to do in the past.

My hon. Friend mentioned the size of the Select Committee. Yes, it is larger than normal, but that is because we wanted to make sure that for this question of Britain’s departure from the European Union all parts of the United Kingdom, including all three devolved parts of the United Kingdom, had proper representation, and that all the main political parties represented in the House have representation on the Committee. I accept that we will not reach complete agreement, but I hope that my hon. Friend at least understands the Government’s reasons for introducing the motion, which refers to the Select Committee being responsible for scrutinising “the expenditure, administration and policy of the Department for Exiting the European Union.”

SELECT COMMITTEES (ALLOCATION OF CHAIRS)

Resolved.

That, with effect from 17 October 2016, the allocation of chairs to select committees set out in the Order of the House of 3 June 2015, pursuant to Standing Order No. 122B, be amended as follows:

(a) by leaving out:

| “Energy and Climate Change” Scottish National Party |

(b) by inserting:

| Exiting the European Union | Labour Scottish National Party |
| International Trade | (Mr Lidington.) |

ELECTION OF SELECT COMMITTEE CHAIRS (NOTICE OF ELECTION)

Resolved.

That, notwithstanding the provisions of Standing Orders Nos. 122B(7) and 122C(1), the Speaker may announce a date for an election of chairs of select committees before 20 October 2016 in respect of which the requirement of notice is not met.--(Mr Lidington.)

Mr Speaker: I will now announce arrangements for electing Chairs for the Select Committees on Culture, Media and Sport, Exiting the European Union, Home Affairs, International Trade, and Science and Technology. Nominations should be submitted in the Table Office by 12 noon on Tuesday 18 October. If a post has more than one candidate the ballot will take place on Wednesday 19 October from 10 am to 1.30 pm in Committee Room 16. Briefing notes with more details about the election will be made available to Members and published on the intranet.

PETITIONS

Mr Speaker: There are a large number of petitions to be presented, and I hope that it will be of assistance to the House if I set out how we shall proceed. Once the first petition relating to implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts has been read to the House, with its prayer, subsequent petitions on the same topic should not be read out in full—not that anybody would wish to do so, of course. Members should give a brief description—I emphasise “brief description”—of the number and location of the petitioners, and state that the petition is “in the same terms.” Members presenting more than one petition should of course present them together.

When Barbara Keeley has presented her petitions, she should proceed to the Table and hand her first petition to the Clerk, who will read out the title in the usual way. For subsequent petitions—what a wonderful
[Mr Speaker]

script this is—I will call the Member to present the petition briefly and then the Member should proceed directly to the petitions bag at the back of the Chair. I will call the next Member immediately after the previous Member has finished speaking.

Members who have been in the House for a while might recall that a precedent was set—although it is not obliged in any sense to be repeated—for a half-hour limit on the presentation of petitions.—[Interruption.] No, not half an hour for each petition. Far be it for me instinctively to want didactically to adopt that approach at this stage. I do not wish to do so and I am quite happy to keep it more open. However, there are a very large number of petitions and it will in no way be acceptable for Members to speak to their petition for even one minute. I am asking colleagues to speak for around 10 seconds so that we can make timely progress. I hope that is clear and that colleagues will wish to cooperate, in the interests of efficiency and of the prospect of reaching the Adjournment debate secured around 10 seconds so that we can make timely progress.

Barbara Keeley

**Implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts**

6.47 pm

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): I am grateful for the chance tonight to present petitions calling for fair transitional arrangements for 1950s-born women affected by changes to the state pension age. That group of women is bearing an unfair burden. When the Pensions Act 2011 was debated, Government Ministers promised transitional arrangements to ease that burden, but those have not materialised, leaving women in our constituency and many others across the UK facing hardship, stress and worry.

I will read out the full text of the petition but, as you have said, Mr Speaker, other Members need not do so. In addition to presenting a petition on behalf of constituents in Worsley and Eccles South, I am presenting petitions from the following constituencies: Ashford; Basildon and Billericay; Basingstoke; Beverley and Holderness; Bexhill and Battle; Birmingham, Hall Green; Birmingham, Perry Barr; Blackley and Broughton; Blackpool North and Cleveleys; Blackpool South; Boston and Skegness; Bosworth; Bournemouth East; Bournemouth West; Brecon and Radnorshire; Brentwood and Ongar; Bridgwater and West Somerset; Broadland; Bury South; Bury St Edmunds; Canterbury; Central Suffolk and North Ipswich; Chichester; Chippingham; Dartford; Daventry; Derbyshire Dales; Dover; Dudley North; Ealing North; East Devon; Exeter; Folkestone and Hythe; Gainsborough; Grantham and Stamford; Gravesend; Great Yarmouth; Halesowen and Rowley Regis; Hastings and Rye; Hemsworth; Hereford and South Herefordshire; High Peak; Huntingdon; Ipswich; Kenilworth and Southam; Lincoln; Louth and Horncastle; Ludlow; Medway; Rutland and Melton; Meon Valley; Mid Dorset and North Poole; Mid Sussex; Monmouth; Newark; Newbury; Newport West; Newton Abbot; North Cornwall; North Devon; North Dorset; North East Derbyshire; North East Hampshire; North Somerset; Plymouth, Moor View; Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport; Poole; Rushcliffe; Scarborough and Whitby; Sevenoaks; Shrewsbury and Atcham; Somerton and Frome; South East Cornwall; South West Devon; South West Hertfordshire; South West Norfolk; South Ribble; South Staffordshire; South Suffolk; Spelthorne; Stourbridge; Stroud; North Swindon; Taunton Deane; North Thanet; The Cotswolds; The Wrekin; Tiverton and Honiton; Torbay; Torridge and West Devon; Totnes; Truro and Falmouth; West Dorset; Wycombe; Wyre and Preston North; Wyre Forest; and Yeovil.

May I thank all those who have signed this petition across the country, and may I thank the Journal Office for all its work in registering the petitions?

The petition states:
The petition of residents of Worsley and Eccles South,
Declares that as a result of the way in which the 1995 Pension Act and the 2011 Pension Act were implemented, women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age; further that hundreds of thousands of women have had significant changes imposed on them with little or no personal notice; further that implementation took place faster than promised; further that this gave no time to make alternative pension plans; and further that retirement plans have been shattered with devastating consequences.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I rise to present a petition on behalf of 485 residents of Delyn constituency, in north Wales, in the same terms as my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South. I have had nothing but support for the petition and for justice for the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign.

The Petition of the residents of Delyn.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I rise to present this petition on behalf of 485 residents of North Ayrshire and Arran in the same terms. I present today 2,534 signatures on behalf of my constituents, who are deeply concerned about this social justice issue and wish to make their voices heard.

The Petition of the residents of North Ayrshire and Arran.

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): I rise to present this petition on behalf of hundreds of concerned residents of Wigan in the same terms as my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

The Petition of the residents of Wigan.

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): I rise to present this petition on behalf of 350 of my constituents in Lewes in the same terms as that presented by the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

The Petition of the residents of Lewes.
of Inverclyde. It received 460 signatures.

Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): I rise to present this petition in the same terms on behalf of the constituents of Inverclyde. It received 460 signatures.

The Petition of the residents of Inverclyde.

Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): I rise to present this petition on behalf of many hundreds of residents of Scunthorpe constituency in the same terms as my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South. I also present a petition on behalf of the residents of Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross.

The Petition of the residents of Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross.

Dr Paul Monaghan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (SNP): I rise to present this petition containing 2,156 signatures on behalf of the residents of Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross in the same terms as the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South. I also present a petition on behalf of the constituency of Wansbeck.

The Petition of the residents of Wansbeck.

Corri Wilson (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): I rise to present this petition on behalf of the residents of Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock in the same terms as the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

The Petition of the residents of Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): I rise to present 647 signatures on behalf of the residents of Berwick-upon-Tweed and Hexham constituencies in the same terms as the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

The Petition of the residents of Berwick-upon-Tweed.

The Petition of the residents of Hexham.

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): I rise to present this petition on behalf of the residents of the constituency of Stroud in the same terms as the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

The Petition of the residents of Stroud.

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): I rise to present this petition on behalf of 276 residents of Falkirk in the same terms as the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

The Petition of the residents of Falkirk.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I rise to present this petition on behalf of more than 400 residents of the constituency of Stretford and Urmston in the same terms as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

The petition of residents of Stretford and Urmston.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): I rise to present this petition on behalf of the residents of Argyll and Bute in the same terms as that of the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

The petition of residents of Argyll and Bute.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I rise to present a petition of 4,122 of my constituents in Kingston upon Hull North in the same terms as that presented by my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South. I also present a petition on behalf of the constituency of Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford.

The petition of residents of Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I rise to present this petition on behalf of the residents of Linlithgow and East Falkirk in the same terms as that of the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

The petition of residents of Linlithgow and East Falkirk.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): I rise to present a petition in the same terms on behalf of 565 of my Rutherglen and Hamilton West constituents, who are rightly disgusted by this injustice and are calling for fair transitional arrangements to be put in place by the Government.

The petition of residents of Rutherglen and Hamilton West.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): I rise to present this petition on behalf of the residents of Heywood and Middleton in the same terms as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

The petition of residents of Heywood and Middleton Constituency.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I rise to present this petition on behalf of residents of Glasgow North in the same terms as those of my hon. Friends.

The petition of residents of Glasgow North.

Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): I rise to present this petition on behalf of the residents of St Helens South and Whiston in the same terms as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

The petition of residents of St Helens South and Whiston.
Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): I rise to present this petition, which was signed by more than 1,000 of the constituents of the beautiful city of Dundee, in the same terms as that of the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

The petition of residents of Dundee West.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to present this petition, with 373 signatures, on behalf of the people of Barrow and Furness in the same terms as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

The petition of residents of Barrow and Furness.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I rise to present this petition on behalf of hundreds of residents of Coventry South in the same terms as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

The petition of residents of Coventry South.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): I rise to present a petition on behalf of the residents of Colne Valley in the same terms as that of the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South, signed by highly concerned residents in my constituency in support of fair transitional pension arrangements for women born in the 1950s.

The petition of residents of Colne Valley.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): I rise to present a petition on behalf of the residents of Paisley and Renfrewshire North in the same terms as that of the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South, in the interests of fairness, equality and natural justice.

The petition of residents of Paisley and Renfrewshire North.

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): I rise to present a petition on behalf of hundreds of residents of East Lothian in the same terms as that of the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South. Let justice prevail.

The petition of residents of East Lothian.

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): I rise to present this petition on behalf of the residents of Makerfield in the same terms as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South, which 780 highly concerned residents have signed in support of the WASPI women.

The petition of residents of Makerfield.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): I rise to present a petition signed by hundreds of my constituents in Denton and Reddish, and also a petition of the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley), in the same terms as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South. The 1950s women have spoken—it is time for justice.

The petition of residents of Denton and Reddish.

The petition of the residents of Redcar.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I rise to present this petition on behalf of the residents of Ellesmere Port and Neston in the same terms as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

The petition of residents of Ellesmere Port and Neston.

Calum Kerr (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (SNP): I rise to present this petition on behalf of 760 of the residents of Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk in the same terms as that of the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

The petition of residents of Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I rise to present a petition on behalf of the residents of St Austell and Newquay in the same terms as that of the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South. The petition calls on the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s, who are most impacted by the increase in the state pension age.

The petition of St Austell and Newquay.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I rise to present a petition on behalf of hundreds of residents of the Glasgow South West constituency in the same terms as that of the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

The petition of residents of Glasgow South West.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to present this petition on behalf of the residents of York Central in the same terms as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South, on behalf of all WASPI women.

The petition of residents of York Central.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Similarly, I rise to present a petition on behalf of the constituents of the Glasgow South borough constituency in the same terms as that of the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

The petition of residents of Glasgow South.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I rise to present a petition on behalf of the residents of the Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey—the concerned residents who have signed in support of the WASPI women—in the same terms as that of the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

The petition of residents of Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey.

Mr Speaker: I call Alex Chalk. Where is the fella? I call Scott Mann.
Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): I rise to present petitions on behalf of the residents of North Cornwall and of Camborne and Redruth in the same terms as the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South, and on behalf of our Cornish WASPI women.

The Petition of residents of North Cornwall.

The Petition of residents of Camborne and Redruth.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I rise to present this petition on behalf of the residents of Kilmarnock and Loudoun in the same terms as the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South. It is signed by 160 people, but supported by many more due to the unfairness of the situation.

The Petition of residents of Kilmarnock and Loudoun.

Michelle Donelan (Chippenham) (Con): I rise to present this petition on behalf of the residents of Chippenham constituency in the same terms as the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South. It has been signed by 1,656 of my constituents, reflecting the level of local discontent on the issue.

The Petition of residents of Chippenham.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): I rise to present this petition on behalf of 982 residents of Wrexham in the same terms as my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South—thank you to her.

The Petition of residents of Wrexham.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): I rise to present this petition in the same terms as all the others, and add the voices of the ladies of Dundee East to the campaign for pension fairness.

The Petition of residents of Dundee East.

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): I rise to present this petition on behalf of 473 of my constituents in the Vale of Clwyd in the same terms as the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

The Petition of residents of Vale of Clwyd.

Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): I rise to present this petition on behalf of the residents of Clwyd South in the same terms as my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

The Petition of residents of Clwyd South.

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I rise to present this petition on behalf of 2,249 residents of the Waveney constituency in the same terms as the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

The Petition of residents of Waveney.

Michelle Thomson (Edinburgh West) (Ind): I rise to present this petition on behalf of the many residents of Edinburgh West in the same terms as the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

The Petition of residents of Edinburgh West.

Mhairi Black (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (SNP): I rise to present this petition on behalf of the residents of Paisley and Renfrewshire South in the same terms, and urge the Government to correct this appalling injustice.

The Petition of residents of Paisley and Renfrewshire South.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I rise to present this petition on behalf of hundreds of residents of Great Grimsby in the same terms as my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

The Petition of residents of the UK.

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): I rise to present these stylishly presented petitions on behalf of residents of the Banff and Buchan constituency and the Gordon constituency in the same terms as the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South, with 568 and 123 signatories respectively.

The Petition of residents of Banff and Buchan.

The Petition of residents of Gordon.

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I rise to present this petition on behalf of the wonderful WASPI campaigners and 455 residents of Durham city on the same basis as my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South. I have been advised that I need to declare an interest because I fall into the relevant age group.

The Petition of residents of Durham.

Caroline Ansell (Eastbourne) (Con): I rise to present this petition on behalf of more than 700 residents in Eastbourne and Willingdon in the same terms as the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

The Petition of residents of Eastbourne and Willingdon.


Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): I present this petition on behalf of hundreds of residents of Southampton, the WASPI women of Southampton and the constituents of Southampton, Test in the same terms as my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

The Petition of residents of Southampton Test.
Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): I rise to present a petition on behalf of the residents of Ynys Môn in the same terms as my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South. The good people of Anglesey and north Wales want fair transitional arrangements and for the Government to act now.

_The Petition of residents of Anglesey, North Wales._

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): I rise to present this petition on behalf of the residents of Swansea East and the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Nia Griffith) in the same terms as my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

_The Petition of residents of Swansea East._

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I rise to present this petition on behalf of the residents of Lanark and Hamilton East in the same terms as the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South. On behalf of the thousands of WASPI women, and in the spirit of true equality, I call on the Government to hear their voices and take action now.

_The Petition of residents of Lanark and Hamilton East._

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): I rise to present this petition on behalf of 316 residents of Thanet South in the same terms as that of the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

_The Petition of residents of Thanet South._

Rebecca Harris (Castle Point) (Con): I rise to present this petition on behalf of the residents of Castle Point in the same terms as that of the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

_The Petition of residents of Castle Point._

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I rise to present this petition on behalf of the residents of Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney in the same terms as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

_The Petition of residents of Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney._

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): I rise to present this petition on behalf of the residents of Lancaster and Fleetwood in the same terms as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

_The Petition of residents of Lancaster and Fleetwood._

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): I rise to present this petition on behalf of many residents of Gedling, Nottingham East, Nottingham North, Sherwood, Rushcliffe, Ashfield, Mansfield and Derby South, in the same terms as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

_The Petition of residents of Rushcliffe._

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): I rise to present this petition from the residents of Midlothian in the same terms as that of the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South, on behalf of the many hundreds of residents who have signed.

_The Petition of residents of Midlothian._

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): I rise to present this petition, signed by 1,160 people, on behalf of the residents of Moray in the same terms as that of the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

_The Petition of residents of Moray._

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I rise to present the petition on behalf of the residents of Birmingham, Yardley in the same terms as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South, which 587 concerned residents have signed. I thank the Yardley WASPI women for their hard work in collecting the signatures.

_The Petition of residents of Birmingham Yardley._

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I rise to present this beautifully bound petition on behalf of 1,146 residents of Chesterfield in the same terms as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

_The Petition of residents of Chesterfield._
Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I rise to present this petition on behalf of the residents of Nottingham South in the same terms as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Works and Eccles South. I congratulate the magnificent WASPI women of Nottinghamshire.

The Petition of residents of Nottingham South.

[C001876]

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I rise to present this petition in the same terms as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Works and Eccles South on behalf of 227 of my constituents in Newcastle upon Tyne North—only a small proportion of the 4,000 women in my constituency affected by the 2011 changes alone—and also on behalf the residents of the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham). They are asking the Government to right this injustice.

The Petition of residents of Newcastle North.

[C001858]

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I rise to present this petition on behalf of hundreds of residents of East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow, to address justice and pensions inequality, in the same terms as that of the hon. Member for East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow.

The Petition of residents of East Kilbride.

[C001940]

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I rise to present a petition on behalf of hundreds of residents of Wirral South in the same terms as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South—the brilliant Member for that constituency—with sincere thanks to the WASPI women of Merseyside.

The Petition of residents of Wirral South.

[C001813]

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I rise on behalf of the residents of Livingston to present this petition of 530 signatures in the same terms as that of the hon. Member for Livingston. May this Government listen to the WASPI women across this country, and do them justice.

The Petition of residents of Livingston.

[C001817]

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I am Spartacus, and I too rise to present this petition on behalf of the residents of East Worthing and Shoreham in the same terms as that of the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham, with hundreds of signatures collected in just two hours at Shoreham farmers’ market last Saturday morning.

The Petition of residents of East Worthing and Shoreham.

[C001821]

Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): I rise on behalf of the people of Yeovil to present this petition in the same terms as that of the hon. Member for Yeovil.

The Petition of residents of Yeovil Constituency.

[C001822]

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): When it comes to fighting for their rights, the women of Leigh are the WASPIest of them all. That is why I rise to present one of the biggest petitions of them all, with well over 1,000 names. The message they have asked me to convey tonight is, “Prime Minister, we won’t go away until we have justice.”

The Petition of residents of Leigh.

[C001850]

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): It is my privilege on behalf of the residents of Glenrothes and central Fife, and of the neighbouring constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for North East Fife (Stephen Gethins)—my good friend—to present this petition in the same terms as those that have already been presented this evening.

The Petition of residents of Glenrothes.

[C001824]

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to present a petition on behalf of hundreds of residents of Ogmore in the same terms as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Ogmore.

The Petition of residents of Ogmore.

[C001826]

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I rise to present a petition on behalf of 415 residents of Washington and Sunderland West in the same terms as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West. I hope that these petitions will finally make the Government rethink their strategy and the unnecessary suffering caused to these WASPI women.

The Petition of residents of Washington and Sunderland West.

[C001823]

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): I rise to present this petition on behalf of the residents of the South Shields constituency in the same terms as that of my hon. Friend the Member for South Shields.

The Petition of residents of South Shields.

[C001773]

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I rise to present this petition on behalf of the residents of the Eastleigh constituency, including Botley, Hedge End, West End, Bursledon, and of other areas, including the Southampton, Itchen and Southampton, Test constituencies, in the same terms as that of the hon. Member for Eastleigh. And 92 signatures are enclosed.

The petition of residents of Eastleigh.

[C001827]

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I rise to present petitions on behalf of the residents of Manchester, Withington, in the same terms as my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

The Petition of the Residents of Manchester, Withington.

[C001774]
Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Ditto, Mr Speaker. I rise to present a petition for fairness from concerned residents of the Foyle constituency in the same reasonable terms as the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

The Petition of the residents of Foyle.

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): I rise to present this petition from the residents of the Swinton and Silverwood wards in my constituency, who are among more than 50,000 south Yorkshire women hit by these unfair pension age changes, in the same terms as my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

The Petition of the residents of Wentworth and Dearne.

Stephen Phillips (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I know this will come as a shock, Mr Speaker, but I rise to present a petition in the same terms as those of the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South on behalf of very many residents of the constituency of Sleaford and North Hykeham.

The Petition of the residents of Sleaford and North Hykeham.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): I rise to present a petition on behalf of 680 residents of Amber Valley in the same terms as the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

The Petition of residents of Amber Valley.

Robert Flello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): In the same terms, I salute the hundreds of WASPI ladies in Stoke-on-Trent South.

The Petition of residents of Stoke-on-Trent South.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): I, too, out of solidarity, wish to declare an interest. I rise to present a petition on behalf of the constituents of Meriden, but also of the Burton WASPI group, in the same terms as the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

The Petition of residents of Meriden.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): I rise to present this petition on behalf of the residents of Ross, Skye and Lochaber in the same terms as the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South. It is gratifying to see so many women signing the petition and so many Members in the House today. Let us hope that the Government listen, do the right thing and use the surplus in the national insurance fund to bring forward mitigation.

The Petition of residents of Ross, Skye and Lochaber.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): I rise to present a petition in the same terms as that of the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South on behalf of the ladies of Braintree, and also, with permission, on behalf of the ladies of Saffron Walden.

The Petition of residents of Braintree.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I declare an interest, having been born on 7 December 1956. Thank you, Mr Speaker, for allowing me, on behalf of my constituents of Broxtowe, to present this petition in the same terms as the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South.

The Petition of residents of Broxtowe.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I rise to present this petition on behalf of the residents of Cheltenham in the same terms as the hon. Member for Worsley and Eccles South. I thank the Cheltenham WASPI women for their dogged and dignified campaign.

The Petition of residents of Cheltenham.

Mr Speaker: That was all very efficiently completed by my colleagues in under half an hour. Thank you very much indeed for your co-operation. We come now to the Adjournment. May I appeal to Members who are leaving the Chamber to do so quickly and quietly, so that the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch) can present her case and be heard?
Police Officer Safety

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

7.12 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): May I say how pleased I am to have the opportunity to raise in the Chamber the issue of police officer safety? I thank all those colleagues who have stayed for the debate. That is appreciated not just by me, but by the hard-working and dedicated police officers who we represent up and down the country. I also take this opportunity to thank all MPs who showed their support for the campaign at the drop-in session earlier today.

On Friday 5 August during the summer recess, I joined West Yorkshire police for a 2 pm till 10 pm shift to get the front-line experience, and to see just how the demands on local policing are changing. I spent the afternoon with neighbourhood policing officer PC Kim McCloskey, visiting community projects and seeing some of the great work going on at the grassroots Ovenden Phoenix football club, before spending the evening with response officers reacting to 999 calls. West Yorkshire Police Federation chair, Chief Inspector Nick Smart, had only recently been to see me to raise concerns about an increase in assaults on police officers, and to outline how depleted numbers are impacting on front-line capabilities.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): My hon. Friend rightly talks about an increase in those incidents, but does she agree that one of the most important things we need to do is collect more accurate data so that we can see precisely what is going on in that respect?

Holly Lynch: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend, and will come to that in more detail later.

With those concerns in mind, I was keen to see for myself just how well police officers on the front line are coping with cuts of £160 million over five years, resulting in the loss of 1,200 police officers—a reduction of 20% of the force. As an MP, I already work closely with local neighbourhood policing teams. Headed up by Inspector Colin Skeath, there is some outstanding work going on to address the underlying causes of crime, to tackle antisocial behaviour, and really to build trust and engagement across communities. I am always amazed that neighbourhood police officers seem to know the name of every kid in their patch. I pay tribute to the invaluable work they do. Long may it continue.

It was into the evening, when I moved over to response policing, that I joined PC Craig Gallant reacting to 999 calls. That was where I could really see the strain on the service. I had already discussed with the Police Federation and senior officers my concerns that, due to a combination of reduced numbers and the ever expanding responsibilities of the police, officers are now regularly being asked to respond to emergency calls on their own. Only days before my shift, a female police officer responded to a domestic call in my district. Disgracefully, she was head-butted by an offender, knocking out her teeth and leaving her with a broken eye socket.

It was not long into my time with PC Gallant that we attempted to stop a vehicle to speak to the driver. Having turned on the blue lights, the car initially sped away. However, after a short chase the driver eventually thought better of it and pulled over. PC Gallant asked the driver to get out of the vehicle, but he refused. As he continued to instruct the driver to get out the car, a crowd began to gather, with some onlookers becoming increasingly hostile; passing vehicles also began to take an interest. A second vehicle then pulled up at speed. As the passenger from the first car got out to get into the second, the situation very quickly escalated. PC Gallant found himself surrounded, dealing with an aggressive crowd from all directions. When he was forced to draw his baton while instructing the crowd to move back, I was so concerned for his safety that I rang 999 myself, believing it was the fastest way to make contact with the control room and stress just how urgently he needed back-up. Thankfully, other officers arrived at the scene shortly afterwards to help to manage the situation. Amazingly, no injuries were sustained on that occasion, but I saw for myself just how quickly situations can escalate and how vulnerable officers are when they are out on their own.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady for giving way and for bringing this very important issue to the Chamber for consideration today. Lady Lynch will be aware that in Northern Ireland police officers carry personal weapons both on duty and at home because of the threat to them. I spoke to her about this issue today and she may have a different opinion, but does she feel that it is important that we protect police officers at home and at work, and that one way of doing that is to give them a personal weapon that they can access at any time? That provides safety for them and their families.

Holly Lynch: The circumstances in Northern Ireland are very serious and really quite different from some of the circumstances in the rest of the country. I am asking the Minister today to consider all available options to provide the safety and resources that police officers need on the streets. That is certainly one option that could be considered, with the specifics of Northern Ireland policing.

Returning to the incident on the streets of Halifax, it gives me great pleasure to welcome PC Gallant to Westminster to join us for this debate. I think it is fair to say that he remained much calmer than I did throughout the incident.

An assault on a police officer is an assault on society. It is totally unacceptable that public servants, working in their communities to protect people and help the vulnerable, are subject to assaults as they go about their jobs. Make no mistake, these are tough jobs, and while most officers will tell you that they understand there are risks, being a punching bag should never be part and parcel of the job. In West Yorkshire alone, there were 991 recorded assaults on police officers last year, with an estimated 23,000 across the country. In addition, many attacks are going unreported or are being side-lined in the pursuit of other charges, making it extremely difficult to understand the true scale of the problem.

Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): In Cleveland, a police officer has had their jaw broken twice in the past 12 months. That follows on from the fact that in the past six years,
Cleveland has seen a 25% cut in the number of front-line police officers. Does my hon. Friend think that that is a factor? The amount of single staffing patrols has now increased to such a level that officers are exposed to increased danger.

Holly Lynch: There are no two ways about it. I will come on to that in more detail in my speech. That is a very serious incident. Sending officers out on their own just is not working.

When I asked the House of Commons Library for statistics, by police force, of assaults on officers, it responded by saying that there is a lack of official statistics in this area. A recent Home Office report cites that assaults on officers and police community support officers are not collected as national statistics. Instead, the figures are estimates based on two limited data sources. To be fair to the Home Office, I very much welcome the recent efforts it has made to improve the system for recording assaults on officers, but there is still a long way to go.

Last year the Home Office asked forces to provide data on assaults on a voluntary basis. However, it recognised that there were flaws to that approach, concluding that “the figures...are not directly comparable at police force area level”. and that “the estimates are relatively crude, and should be interpreted with caution.”

As the data are not collected, we simply cannot answer some of the bigger questions. Is the number of assaults going up? Are some forces failing to protect their officers? Have cuts to police budgets made policing more dangerous?

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on her campaign. I and other Members of the House attended the police bravery awards this year, where we saw the incredible work being done by our police forces all over the country. One of the issues that has been raised for several years is that cuts in the psychiatric service have resulted in police officers having to deal with mental health issues in the custody suite. Does she agree that that needs to be addressed? This is really not what police officers should be doing.

Holly Lynch: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. We see police forces having to pick up the slack where there have been cuts to other agencies—agencies that should be taking a lead in dealing with some of these quite difficult social problems. I will come to how many vulnerable people were missing when I did my shift with West Yorkshire police and the impact that had on how many officers were available to respond to 999 calls.

To return to the statistics, I am asking the Home Office to work with police forces to standardise the process of collecting that information. Quite simply, if an officer is assaulted, in any force at any time, let us record it. Assaults on officers must be the subject of robust investigations. While officers need to play their part in that and follow up by reporting instances where they have been the victim of an assault, I also appreciate that they will not report injuries unless they have the confidence that those involved will be investigated and prosecuted appropriately.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for raising this issue on behalf of West Yorkshire police, our local force. Will she join me in welcoming the recruitment of an extra 300 officers in West Yorkshire? Does she also agree that we need some exemplary sentences as a deterrent, so that the police can have the assurance of knowing that anyone who perpetrates violence against a police officer or PCSO will receive a harsher sentence?

Holly Lynch: Of course, sentencing plays a big part in deterring those contemplating assault on a police officer. I very much welcome that recruitment drive, but we have seen the loss of 1,200 officers in West Yorkshire, so the faster those new boots are on the ground, the better.

I welcome the work of the Police Federation’s John Apter in Hampshire, which has been an effective means of establishing best practice. I would encourage all forces to consider rolling out similar schemes for recording and investigating assaults on officers. Police officers who are assaulted deserve the full backing of the justice system, as the hon. Gentleman has just said. Since my shift with West Yorkshire police, I have become aware of at least five more assaults on officers in my constituency in the days that followed and have been made aware of some absolutely horrific incidents reported to me by serving officers all over the country—indeed, we have already heard many more today. What has shocked me, and what thoroughly depresses police officers, is that sentences handed down to offenders for assaults on police are too lenient compared to the seriousness of the crime or, more crucially, serve as a deterrent.

Byron Davies (Gower) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this debate. After 32 years of policing in London, I can tell her that I was involved in several scuffles, with only the protection of a small piece of wood in a side pocket and a radio that was only good for throwing at decamping suspects. Does she agree that poor sentencing reduces the seriousness of assaults on police and has the effect of lowering morale and, above all, respect for law enforcement?

Holly Lynch: The hon. Gentleman he is absolutely right. Morale is essential in the police force. We have to get this right or we will start to lose good officers as a result.

To reiterate, we make the law here, but we ask the police to uphold and enforce it out there. To assault a police officer is to show a complete disregard for law and order, our shared values and democracy itself. That must be reflected in sentencing, particularly for repeat offenders. To give hon. Members just a couple of examples, a man who assaulted four officers in the south of England earlier this year, causing serious injury to one officer in particular by gouging their eyes, was ordered to pay compensation and received a two-month suspended sentence.

One of the most harrowing attacks on officers brought to my attention was on the front page of the Scottish Daily Mail in September. A man set upon two officers,
one male and one female, subjecting them to an onslaught of blows after initially seeming to comply with a body search. Footage of the incident, which was widely shared on social media, shows onlookers beginning to film the assault on their smart phones, while the officers struggle to defend themselves. In court, the offender was ordered to carry out 200 hours of unpaid work, pay compensation to the officers and placed under supervision for 18 months.

I could go on—and I really could go on—because since securing this debate, I have been sent examples from officers all over the country, most of whom have themselves been on the receiving end of violent attacks, and who feel thoroughly let down by the system.

Having looked into sentencing in more detail, I referred to the “Assault Definitive Guideline” publication, produced by the Sentencing Council in 2011. The guidelines assist all members of the judiciary who deal with sentencing. They list the measures of both harm and culpability to assess whether an assault on an officer is a category 1, 2 or 3 offence. They then state the starting point for an appropriate sentence in each of the categories, with the factors that may be taken into consideration in arriving at a final sentencing decision.

The starting point for sentencing following a category 1 assault on a police officer, which represents the greatest harm and the highest culpability, is a 12-week custodial sentence. However, the guidelines then go on to say:

“When sentencing category 1 offences, the court should also consider if the custody threshold has been passed? If so, is it unavoidable that a custodial sentence be imposed and can that sentence be suspended?”

I really struggle with the notion of a suspended sentence. It feels as though the custodial element of the sentence itself does reflect the seriousness of the crime, but its suspended nature means that victims often leave court feeling that it will have zero practical impact on the offender.

I appreciate that the Minister will most likely stress the independent nature of the Sentencing Council, which I understand, but when sentencing has the potential to be such a significant part of the package of measures used to deter those from using violence against police officers, as the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Jason McCartney) said, I am asking the Minister to consider any and all means available to him to work with his colleagues in the Department for Justice to ensure that we use sentencing as a means of offering the police all the protection we can. In addition, there are no two ways about it, and as we have already heard, the cuts have had consequences. The danger of assault is heightened when officers are on the front line with diminished support due to pressures on officer numbers.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for the fantastic work she has done in campaigning on this very important issue. I spoke to a West Yorkshire police officer recently, who told me that there are nowadays only double crews at night. He explained that the risk was present throughout the day and that the risk did not discriminate between different times of the day. Does my hon. Friend agree that this represents a very significant risk to the safety of our police officers?

Holly Lynch: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have seen an increase in the complexity of the crime that needs to be addressed at the same time as staggering cuts to the number of officers available to do that work, which does impact on the safety of officers as they go about their business.

Certainly in West Yorkshire—I know this is reflected in the forces across the country—the police have had to weather staggering cuts at a time when their case load is becoming increasingly complicated. I have seen the thin blue line stretched desperately thin, as the demands on officers continue to grow. The pressures of terrorism, safeguarding and cybercrime are all serious, but tackling these problems requires the appropriate resourcing. Increased awareness of exploitation in all its ugly forms, from child sexual exploitation to human trafficking, means that, quite rightly, priorities have changed to reflect that. Any officer will tell us that one of the biggest challenges putting additional pressure on the police is the changing nature of dealing with vulnerable young people and adults, particularly those with complex mental health challenges.

In the 24 hours leading up to my time on duty, Calderdale police had safely recovered nine vulnerable missing people and were involved in looking for an additional seven the following day. The weekly average for missing people in Calderdale is 43, with 416 a week going missing across the force. Some 114 of those are deemed to be high-risk individuals.

As MPs, as we have heard, we see it all the time—people with often complex vulnerabilities struggling to get the support they need in a climate where local authority budgets have been slashed and NHS funding has been squeezed. It is becoming a massive social problem, which is increasingly falling to the police to deal with, due to the inability of other agencies to take a lead or to take responsibility.

During my time with West Yorkshire police, I was able to see the difficulties stemming from having constantly to divert police crews into locating missing people, which undermines neighbourhood policing work and eats into the number of response officers available for 999 calls. We have a responsibility to keep the most vulnerable people away from harm and exploitation. Yet the police cannot be the catch-all for all problems. With reduced numbers, it is simply not sustainable and, let us be honest, nor are the police the most appropriate agency to be doing that work. We have to look at ways of empowering other agencies to take the lead. Not having the right answers to these questions means that the police are stretched as never before. As a result, lone officers—single crews—are regularly asked to attend emergencies and potentially dangerous incidents on their own, or with fewer officers than are required to manage such situations safely.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for bringing this important issue to our attention. I must declare an interest, as I am proud to say that a member of my family is a serving police officer. I worry about his safety and the safety of his colleagues, given that they are so often required to go out on their own. Does my hon. Friend agree that, as well as a system of monitoring assaults on police officers, there should be a system of monitoring the number of occasions on which they are required to attend incidents on their own?
Holly Lynch: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. A police officer who is deployed to deal with a dangerous situation alone is very vulnerable. That seems to be a significant contributing factor. When I went out with a police officer who had been deployed on his own, I saw for myself how quickly situations could escalate.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. When I talk to members of the Greater Manchester police force, they mention the large number of incidents involving people with mental health issues. As a result of cuts in mental health services, we in Greater Manchester have lost more than 1,850 police officers since 2010. That is a cut of 23%. I think my hon. Friend mentioned a 25% cut, and such a level of cuts is not unusual. Does she agree that it is inevitable that officers will be stretched and, as a result, put in danger?

Holly Lynch: We have heard from Members on both sides of the House about the increased complexity surrounding crime, and the different types of crime with which the police are having to deal while also weathering truly staggering cuts. As a result, they are naturally more vulnerable when doing their work on the streets of all our constituencies.

When officers are deployed on their own, are they really equipped to deal with an incident when they arrive? The use of Tasers is probably a debate for another day, but, again, I ask the Minister to think about the package of measures that is needed to give officers every opportunity to manage the risks to which they are exposed on the front line. The provision of more widely available Taser units, with the training to accompany that responsibility, could be one of those measures.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): The extent of the problem is indeed startling. I have obtained some statistics, because we take measurements in Northern Ireland. Between 2014 and 2016, a quarter of all police officers serving there—1,631—were assaulted, and nearly 500 have been assaulted in the current year. Those are atrocious figures. The Government must tell the Northern Ireland Administration, and chief constables throughout the United Kingdom, that they need to recruit more police officers—data that will give us a much greater understanding of the complexity of the problem.

Holly Lynch: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that staggering and depressing intervention. We have seen what he has described far too often, and the statistics are very serious. I hope that the Minister will respond with what could be easy and effective ways of dealing with sentencing to ensure that the greatest possible deterrents exist. We quite often see repeat offenders, and that cannot be allowed to continue. We must give police officers every protection that we can possibly provide.

What additional protections might officers need? Perhaps controversially, I want to refer to spit hoods. I am all for informed debate about the issue, but the truth is that if people are politically uncomfortable about spit hoods, I can promise them that somewhere, right now, there is a police officer who is being spat at and who is even more uncomfortable. As well as being thoroughly unpleasant, spitting blood and saliva at another human being can pose a real risk of transmission of a range of infectious diseases, some with life-changing or even lethal consequences. We have a duty of care to protect officers from that, whenever possible.

The Centre for Public Safety has published a briefing on the issue, and I thank it for the work that it has done in this regard. The briefing cited a recent occasion on which the Metropolitan police were called to a disturbance and arrested a 20-year-old woman on suspicion of a public order offence. The woman, who had hepatitis B, then bit her own lip and spat blood at three officers who had to be taken to hospital for anti-viral treatment. Anti-viral treatments are not guaranteed to prevent the transmission of infectious diseases, and an officer may have to endure a wait of over six months to find out whether the treatment has been successful.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Lady, who has been very generous in giving way, but she might wish to be aware that if she would like a reply from the Minister, he has only until 7.42 to give her that reply.

Holly Lynch: I am getting there, Madam Deputy Speaker. Thank you for that reminder.

As I was saying, I am open to a debate on spit hoods, but they might not be so necessary if sentencing was more effective and offered a tougher deterrent. However, the Sentencing Council’s 2011 guidelines removed spitting as a factor increasing seriousness. In the council’s assessment of the guidelines, published in 2015, sentencers attributed a shift towards less severe sentencing to that decision. A district judge went so far as to say that “a spit in the face can’t be identified as a sustained or repeated assault for greater harm. Yet in my view it is one of the most serious ways of assaulting.”

I am asking the Minister to ensure that the Home Office is collecting accurate data about assaults on police officers—data that will give us a much greater insight into the scale of the problem and empower decision makers to respond accordingly. I am asking him to work with colleagues to explore options for much tougher sentencing. If an officer is the victim of a category 1 assault, I would expect to see a sentence that sends a strong message. Assaulting the police shows contempt for our collectively agreed laws and all those who uphold them, and it will not be tolerated. It worries me that the ever-growing demands on the police are undermining their ability to do some of the basics. I am calling on the Minister to recognise that officers are routinely deployed on their own, that when an officer calls for back-up, only boots on the ground will do, and that numbers matter.

Finally, I want to take this opportunity to pay tribute, on behalf of all of us here, to the brave unarmed West Yorkshire police officers who apprehended the man who took Jo Cox from us on the streets of Batley and Spen earlier this year. Their actions demonstrated that we ask the police to walk towards some of the most dangerous situations, and we have a responsibility to offer them all the protection we can in doing so. We are grateful to them, and their courage is a testament to all our brave policemen and women across the country.
In those cases, sentencing will largely be guided by the charge of actual bodily harm or a more serious offence. Where there is little or no physical harm, assaults also two offences specific to assaults on police officers treated more severely in appropriate cases. There are already provisions in law that an assault on a police officer to be community. They keep us all safe.

Police officer is to be respected and is there to serve the community. We need to ensure that the public understand that a police officer is completely unacceptable, and anyone who is found guilty can expect to face the full force of the law.

It is important that we have a good understanding of the scale of the issue, so that chief officers can do everything in their power to keep their officers safe. We have been working for some time to improve the data available. As a first step, it was right that provisional statistics of officer assaults were published in July, despite the limitations of those data. The figures indicated that in 2015-16, there were an estimated 23,000 assaults on officers across all forces. The data also indicated that there were nearly 8,000 assaults involving injury reported by officers, and 270 reported by police community support officers.

We will continue to build on that work, and we need to make it clear that it is completely unacceptable to commit an offence against a police officer. It is not good enough for people to say that such incidents are part of the cost of a police officer going about their business. That is simply not the case, and we need to put a stop to it. We need to ensure that the public understand that a police officer is to be respected and is there to serve the community. They keep us all safe.

I can assure the hon. Lady that sentencing guidelines effectively, ensuring the welfare of all officers and staff. As a first step, it was right that provisional statistics of officer assaults were published in July, despite the limitations of those data. The figures indicated that in 2015-16, there were an estimated 23,000 assaults on officers across all forces. The data also indicated that there were nearly 8,000 assaults involving injury reported by officers, and 270 reported by police community support officers.

We will continue to build on that work, and we need to make it clear that it is completely unacceptable to commit an offence against a police officer. It is not good enough for people to say that such incidents are part of the cost of a police officer going about their business. That is simply not the case, and we need to put a stop to it. We need to ensure that the public understand that a police officer is to be respected and is there to serve the community. They keep us all safe.

I can assure the hon. Lady that sentencing guidelines already provide for an assault on a police officer to be treated more severely in appropriate cases. There are also two offences specific to assaults on police officers where there is little or no physical harm. Assaults resulting in more serious injuries would result in a charge of actual bodily harm or a more serious offence. In those cases, sentencing will largely be guided by the level of harm and offender culpability. In the most serious cases, where an individual is convicted of the murder of a police officer in the course of duty, a whole life order will now be the sentencing starting point, thanks to the work of the previous Home Secretary, as laid out in the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015. That was a landmark change, and one that the Police Federation had campaigned long and hard for on behalf of their members. It is right, as the hon. Lady outlined, that the courts still have the discretion, through the independence of the judiciary, to take account of all the circumstances of each case in determining the appropriate sentence. It is right for them to have that ability to assess in any given case, based on the facts of the case, what is the most appropriate sentence. She is also quite right to say that the Sentencing Council has a role to play in the sentencing guidelines, and that it is an independent body.

The hon. Lady touched on resources. I remind her that there has been a good deal for policing with direct resource funding to police and crime commissioners, including the precept, being protected this year. Ultimately, all decisions about local policing resources and roles are for chief constables, held to account by their locally accountable PCCs. Single-crewing falls into the operational duty and decisions of local chief constables. Chiefs and PCCs have a duty to manage and support the police working effectively, ensuring the welfare of all officers and staff.

Holly Lynch: Does the Minister recognise that with the number of 999 calls to a lot of our forces, sometimes it is a choice between sending a lone officer or nobody, because those forces are that stretched?

Brandon Lewis: As we are limited to a few seconds of time, I will have to say that, in another place and at another opportunity, I will go through how the changing police force means that the work they are doing is changing. Having more officers on the frontline with their time focused on working with communities is a good thing. There is also the work with the College of Policing. I know that chief constables will continue to do what they can to ensure that they keep their people safe and enable them to work confidently to tackle the challenges of modern crime. We will continue to support them in this.

There is much more that I and probably other Members would like to say on this issue, but we are time-constrained. I will leave it there, but I look forward to speaking to the hon. Lady and the gentlemen who have come to watch us this evening straight after this debate.

Question put and agreed to.

7.42 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Wednesday 12 October 2016

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Economy

1. Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on the economy of Scotland.

2. Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on the economy of Scotland.

3. Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): What assessment he has made of the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on the economy of Scotland.

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): Mr Speaker, may I begin by commending you not only on your attendance at the Davis cup semi-final in Glasgow, but on your obvious enthusiasm and exuberance, which the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) and I were witness to? I am sure you will agree that, although the result was not as we would have wished, the event once again confirmed Glasgow’s place as a great international sporting venue.

The UK leaving the EU should be seen as an opportunity for Scotland. Today’s GDP figures are an encouraging sign of growth. However, Scotland is still lagging behind the UK as a whole and that underlines the need for Scotland’s two Governments to work together to take such opportunities.

Mr Speaker: The Secretary of State and his daughter did a fantastic job as well, as did the constituency Member of Parliament.

Carol Monaghan: Given that Brexit continues to be billed as taking back control, will the Secretary of State tell us which of the powers currently controlled by Brussels the UK Government will commit to giving to Holyrood and which will be re-reserved to Westminster?

David Mundell: It is self-evident that, because the devolution settlements within the United Kingdom are predicated on the basis that the United Kingdom was a member of the European Union, those devolution settlements will be changed by the United Kingdom leaving the EU. Those will be matters that will be subject to debate and discussion.

Patrick Grady: I am not entirely certain that the Secretary of State answered that question. Will he categorically rule out powers being re-reserved to this Parliament as a result of the decision to leave the European Union?

David Mundell: What I can say is that no powers which are currently exercised by the Scottish Parliament will be re-reserved to this Parliament as a result of the United Kingdom leaving the EU.

Dr Philippa Whitford: With a constituency that has an interest in having an aerospace cluster, an airport and large pharmaceutical production, may I ask what the Secretary of State’s view will be on the single market, the open skies and the European Medicines Agency?

David Mundell: The Prime Minister made it very, very clear at the Conservative conference that we want to have access to the single market and to ensure free trade. The sectors that the hon. Lady mentioned are very important; they are part of the group of sectors with which we are engaging very closely to identify their specific interests and concerns so that they are part of the UK’s negotiating position.

Michael Gove (Surrey Heath) (Con): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right in saying that we are leaving a dysfunctional union—the European Union—and that that is an opportunity for the people of Scotland. Is it not also the case that if we were to follow the Scottish National party’s advocacy and leave the union that works—the United Kingdom—we would land the people of Scotland with a huge public sector deficit and the prospect of either tax rises or cuts in services?

David Mundell: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. There seems to be a very strange contradiction here: Members on the SNP Benches are rightly concerned about Scotland’s continued trade with the EU, but they disregard the fact that Scotland’s trade with the rest of the United Kingdom is four times as much as with the
EU, and that a million jobs in Scotland are dependent on our trade within the United Kingdom—that is the union that matters to Scotland.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): Given the importance of that single market to Scotland, does my right hon. Friend agree that the last thing that the Scottish economy needs is the perpetual uncertainty of another independence referendum?

David Mundell: If anyone actually listens to businesses in Scotland and, indeed, to the people of Scotland, it is quite clear that people do not want another divisive independence referendum in Scotland—other than individuals who are obsessed with independence. We need to listen to business, take a second independence referendum off the table and concentrate on getting the best possible deal for Scotland and the UK from these negotiations.

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): As a result of demands from Nissan, the Chancellor of the Exchequer has suggested that companies that will suffer a loss of profits as result of exiting the EU may be due compensation. Can the Secretary of State assure businesses based in Scotland which will suffer the same loss of profits that they will be entitled to the same deal, and if so has he made an assessment of the costs of such compensation?

David Mundell: May I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on retaining his position as shadow Scottish Secretary? I understand that on the Benches behind him is the Westminster spokesman of the Scottish Labour party, and I am sure that it will emerge during these questions how those two positions interrelate.

The point that I would make in response to the hon. Gentleman’s question is that we will have a common response across the United Kingdom and that whatever support is put in place for businesses in the north of England will apply to businesses in Scotland.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Has the Secretary of State seen the report published yesterday by the NAFC Marine Centre, showing that half of all demersal fish and two thirds of all pelagic fish caught in UK waters are caught by boats from other EU countries? Does he understand why Scottish fishermen see these negotiations as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to undo the damage caused by the common fisheries policy, and will he put their interests at the heart of the negotiations, unlike his Tory predecessors in the 1970s, who saw our fishing industry as expendable?

David Mundell: I commend the Scottish Fishermen’s Federation and others on their approach to the negotiations; they see them as an opportunity, for the very reasons referred to by the right hon. Gentleman and by yesterday’s report. The SFF was quite right to characterise the report as “A Sea of Opportunities”, and it will have my support in realising them.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Has the Minister included, in his assessment of the impact on the Scottish economy of the UK leaving the EU, the impact of Scotland leaving its biggest single market: the rest of the UK—something that some people are demanding, week in, week out?

David Mundell: As I said earlier, I find it very surprising that people who declare a great enthusiasm for the European single market are willing to dismiss the United Kingdom single market, which is worth four times as much to the Scottish economy and employs a million Scottish people.
Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Today’s GDP figures for Scotland are welcome, as is the major increase in GDP arising from the services sector, probably driven by the financial services sector in Scotland, and in my city of Edinburgh. What specifically is the Secretary of State doing to protect that financial services sector, and can he give the House, and Scotland, an assurance that he will stand by the Conservative party’s commitment in his 2015 manifesto to saying yes to the single market?

David Mundell: First, we fully recognise the importance of the financial services sector in not just Edinburgh but Scotland more generally. I am determined to ensure that its interests are protected. We are working very closely with it to ensure that it is very much at the forefront as we move forward with establishing the UK’s negotiating position.

Overseas Trade

3. Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): What discussions he has had with businesses and trade bodies in Scotland on opportunities for overseas trade. [906391]

6. Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con): What discussions he has had with businesses and trade bodies in Scotland on opportunities for overseas trade. [906394]

7. James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): What discussions he has had with businesses and trade bodies in Scotland on opportunities for overseas trade. [906396]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): Since the EU referendum, Scotland Office Ministers have held over 50 meetings with Scottish Government Ministers, Scottish organisations and trade bodies to discuss the implications for Scotland. We intend to hold further such meetings in the coming months, to ensure that Scottish business interests are fully represented in the negotiations on the UK’s exit from the EU and in any future trade arrangements.

Chris Philp: Does my right hon. Friend agree that when we negotiate free trade deals outside the European Union, we can remove some of the protectionist tariff barriers that the EU has erected, thereby reducing consumer prices for consumers in Scotland—and, indeed, across the United Kingdom?

David Mundell: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I believe that this Government and this country can be advocates around the world for free trade. Trade liberalisation between advanced economies can have a positive impact on the consumer, and that is what we want to see in Scotland and across the UK.

Mr Harper: Will the Secretary of State reassure the House that as he is conducting discussions around the world and engaging with British business, he gets the maximum opportunities for Scottish business, uses his opportunities to demonstrate that Scotland is better as part of the United Kingdom, and knocks on the head all this talk of independence that we incessantly hear from the Scottish National party?

David Mundell: I agree with my right hon. Friend. It is vital that we promote Scotland’s interests in that way, and do so working in conjunction with the Scottish Government. Both Governments have a role to play—in, for example, as the Scotch Whisky Association identified, developing new markets and promoting that product, which is vital to Scotland’s economy.

James Berry: I was pleased to read last month that exports of Scotch whisky were up for the first time in three years, with a surge of exports to India. Does my right hon. Friend agree that everyone in the UK should work together to support the export of great British products, including great Scottish products such as whisky?

David Mundell: I do agree, as I have set out. Bodies such as the Scotch Whisky Association acknowledge and accept that, and want the two Governments to work together in that regard, and that is what I am committed to doing.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): If the Government leave the European Union without a specific trade arrangement with the EU, is the Secretary of State happy to fall back on World Trade Organisation methods?

David Mundell: I am sure that that is the type of speculation that will constantly be sought from Ministers in the weeks and months ahead. The Prime Minister has set out the process for negotiating our exit from the EU, and at the conclusion of that process I am confident that we will be able to achieve the best possible deal for Scotland and the rest of the UK.

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): The Secretary of State has, on many occasions, extolled the trade benefits of the single market for Scotland. Regardless of whether or not the UK is a member state of the EU, does he still believe that it is in Scotland’s interest to have membership of the single market, rather than trying to negotiate third-party access?

David Mundell: What I have also said on many occasions, as the hon. Lady will know, is that the UK will have a bespoke arrangement with the EU when we leave. It is not appropriate or sensible to see the negotiating process in the context of existing arrangements with other countries or, indeed, the existing structure of the EU. We should seek to get the best possible deal for our businesses.

Mr David Anderson (Blaydon) (Lab): Crucial to promoting trade is the need to support apprenticeships. However, training bodes, organisations, businesses and employers in Scotland have told me that they are struggling to get clear guidance on how the apprenticeship levy will work. Will the Secretary of State ensure, unlike his colleague the Business Secretary, that he works urgently with the Scottish Government to give those people the information that they need?

David Mundell: I am absolutely committed to doing that, and I can confirm that the apprenticeship levy will be discussed when the joint ministerial council meets on 24 October.

Mr Anderson: One area in which apprenticeships could work is the oil industry and the decommissioning of oil rigs. We have already seen the loss of 80,000 jobs in that industry, and that will be compounded if we
continue, as has happened recently, to lose decommissioning contracts to other countries. Do the Government have any strategy at all to ensure that those crucial jobs remain in Scottish hands?

David Mundell: The hon. Gentleman will know that the Government are committed to the industry, and a £2.3 billion investment and associated tax changes were exactly the support that it asked for. We have also established, along with the Scottish Government, the £250 million Aberdeen city deal, which will have at its heart a new technology centre to ensure that skills and jobs remain in the north-east.

Welfare Powers

5. Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to transfer welfare powers to the Scottish Government. [906393]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (David Mundell): A significant number of new welfare powers came into force this September, and give the Scottish Parliament independence to set welfare policy for Scotland. The joint ministerial force this September, and give the Scottish Parliament

Henry Smith: With that significant transfer of powers from the UK Government to Edinburgh, does my right hon. Friend agree that the Scottish Government should get on with exercising those powers for the sake of the welfare of the people of Scotland, rather than wasting time on expensive and unnecessary talk of a second independence referendum?

David Mundell: I absolutely agree. These are significant powers, which the Scottish Government and the Scottish National party in this House asked for. People around Scotland will want to see how they are being deployed and what process is being used. The message from the people of Scotland generally to the Scottish Government is “Get on with the day job.”

11. Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I am sure that at yesterday’s meeting of the joint ministerial working group Scottish Ministers will have stressed their desire to see their employment programmes proceed on a voluntary basis. What steps will the Secretary of State take to ensure that his Government respect that desire?

David Mundell: We have made it absolutely clear that we will respect that desire for the programmes to proceed on a voluntary basis. What I think the people of Scotland will want to know is what the Scottish Government intend to do in relation to people who do not volunteer to be part of the programmes.

North Sea Oil and Gas

8. Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): What discussions the Government have had with oil and gas companies on support for North sea industry. [906397]

10. Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): What discussions the Government have had with oil and gas companies on support for North sea industry. [906399]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Jesse Norman): The Government continue to work closely with industry, both directly and through the Oil and Gas Authority, to drive investment and support jobs in the North sea.

Mark Menzies: Revenue from North sea oil has dropped by more than £10 billion over the past two years. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that public services in Scotland do not suffer as a result of this shortfall in public revenue?

Jesse Norman: My colleague rightly notes, there has been a shock in the oil and gas industry resulting from global changes. As the latest public finance figures show, being part of the UK protects living standards in Scotland. The drop in revenues has been offset by a vigorous programme of Government support in tax relief and allowances, as well as in a host of other areas.

Graham Evans: The supply of home-grown feed stocks is vital to the Cheshire chemicals industry and is in part reliant on the success of North sea oil and gas. Can the Minister assure the House that the Government will continue to take steps to support the many jobs in our foundation industries that depend very much on this sector?

Jesse Norman: My colleague is absolutely right to highlight this issue. The UK chemicals sector is a vital part of our manufacturing industry and an important contributor to the economy. The Government are working closely with the industry to implement the desire to grow gross value added by £105 billion by 2030, and a key element of that will be delivering competitive energy and feed stock supplies.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): Industry has been crystal clear that more work needs to be done to boost exploration. Will the Government bring forward exploration incentives in the autumn statement to protect employment and boost production?

Jesse Norman: Exploration remains very important. The continental shelf is depleting. As the hon. Gentleman will know, the Government have taken some serious steps in Aberdeen with the city deal. I will not comment on the autumn statement, but it is an issue of some focus for the Government.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Since Question Time began this morning, five Members on the Scottish National party Benches have asked about membership of the European Union, and two have asked about Scottish jobs. Seven Members on the Conservative Benches wanted to talk about Scottish independence. Which group would the Secretary of State describe as being obsessed with independence?

Jesse Norman: I can do no better than to refer the hon. Gentleman to the words of Adam Smith, who said that the Union of 1707 was “a measure from which infinite good has been derived” for Scotland.
Steel Industry

9. Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): What assessment he has made of prospects for the steel industry in Scotland.

Mr Speaker: Order. There is far too much noise in the Chamber. The Minister is a debutante at the Box. He ought to be heard.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Jesse Norman): Not quite a debutante, Mr Speaker—we can only hope.

The steel industry in Scotland remains a vital part of the UK steel industry as a whole. The Government continue to engage with steel companies, devolved Governments and trade unions to ensure a sustainable and prosperous steel industry for the UK.

Jesse Norman: Liberty House is taking more than 70% of its new workforce from among former Tata Steel employees, which is good news for Motherwell, and it should be congratulated on that. Will my hon. Friend congratulate the company, in particular, on its apprenticeship programme, which is a positive endorsement of Britain’s engineering future?

Jesse Norman: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to focus on the Dalzell plate mill, which opened last month under its new owners, Liberty House Group, with the Government’s support. As this illustrates, we have taken clear action to help the industry, for example by securing state aid to compensate for energy costs and through flexibility over EU emissions regulations and many other areas. I also share his delight in the work that has been done on apprenticeships.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): During recess, I attended the reopening of the Dalzell works in Motherwell. Will the Minister speak to the Scottish Government about how steel jobs can be saved by putting together a package that really works?

Jesse Norman: I am grateful to the hon. Lady. The Government remain ready to work together with the Scottish Government on any area that can support and protect Scottish jobs and Scottish industry.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [906454] Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 12 October.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Paula Sherriff: Previously, I worked in an NHS service that the coalition Government gifted to Virgin Care, which is now seeking another contract covering my constituency. Among many unethical practices that I witnessed, Virgin imposed a system of double appointments, forcing patients to have unnecessary extra consultations before surgery, boosting its profits at the expense of the taxpayer and patient safety. Is that acceptable? If not, what is the Prime Minister prepared to do about it?

The Prime Minister: Of course, what we want to see in the provision of local services are the best services possible for local people. The hon. Lady talks about outsourcing of services in the NHS; I have to say to her that the party that put greater privatisation into the NHS was not my party but the Labour party.

Economy/Public Services: West Midlands

Q3. [906456] Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of prospects for the steel industry in Scotland.

Michael Fabricant: On the subject of the NHS, 18 months ago my wonderful doctor, Helen Stokes-Lampard, suggested that I have a general “well man” check-up. It is just as well that I did: the blood test revealed a problem with my prostate, despite the fact that I was symptom-free. I was immediately referred to the Queen Elizabeth hospital in Birmingham, whose staff were simply wonderful. After a period of surveillance, I had a prostatectomy back in June.

But hey—I’m now fine! [HON. MEMBERS: “Hooray!”] I want to thank the whole team at the QE, including my surgeon Alan Doherty and my excellent specialist prostate nurse Richard Gledhill, who gave me practical advice. But, in the next 10 years, there will be a real shortage of specialist prostate and urology nurses, as many are due for retirement. May I ask the Prime Minister what the Government can do to avert a shortage of these much needed specialist nurses?

The Prime Minister: May I say to my hon. Friend that the whole House is pleased to see him back in his position as his normal exuberant self? He raises a very serious issue. I join him in commending not only those doctors, nurses and other health service staff who treated him for his prostate cancer, but those doctors and nurses who, day in, day out, are ensuring that, as we see, cancer survival rates are at a record high.

The Government are putting more money into awareness of cancer problems. We will look at the training of nurses—50,000 nurses are in training—and continue to make sure that the specialisms are available to do the work that is necessary in the health service.
Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I, too, join the Prime Minister in wishing the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) well and obviously hope the treatment he got is the same treatment that everybody else gets, because we want good treatment for everybody in our society. [Interruption.] It is not controversial—I am just wishing him well. Is that okay? I am sorry to start on such a controversial note, Mr Speaker. I do apologise.

At the Conservative party conference, the Prime Minister said she wants Britain to be “a country where it doesn’t matter where you were born”, but the Home Secretary’s flagship announcement was to name and shame companies that employ foreign workers. Could the Prime Minister explain why where someone was born clearly does matter to members of her Cabinet?

The Prime Minister: First, may I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on winning the Labour leadership election? [Interruption.] I welcome him back to his place in this House as his normal self. The policy that he has just described was never the policy that the Home Secretary announced. There was no naming and shaming, no published list of foreign workers, no published data. What we are going to consult on is whether we should bring ourselves in line with countries such as the United States of America, which collect data in order to be able to ensure that they are getting the right skills training for workers in their economy.

Jeremy Corbyn: I am most grateful to the over 300,000 people that voted for me to become the leader of my party, which is rather more than voted for the Prime Minister to become the leader of her party. She seems to be slightly unaware of what is going on: first, the Home Secretary briefed that companies would be named and shamed; the Education Secretary clarified that data would only be kept by Government; yesterday, No. 10 said the proposal was for consultation; and the Home Secretary clarified the whole matter by saying, “it’s one of the tools we are going to use”.

This Government have no answers, just gimmicks and scapegoats.

Yesterday, we learned that pregnant women will be forced to hand over their passports at NHS hospitals. No ultrasound without photographic ID—heavily pregnant women sent home on icy roads to get a passport. Are these really the actions of “a country where it doesn’t matter where you were born”? The Prime Minister: I have made absolutely clear the policy that the Home Secretary set out. The right hon. Gentleman raises issues around the health service. I think it is right that we should say that we ensure, when we are providing health services to people, that they are free at the point of delivery; that people are eligible to have those services; that where there are people who come to this country to use our health service, and who should be paying for it, the health service actually identifies them and makes sure that it gets the money from them. I would have thought that that would be an uncontroversial view. Of course, emergency care will be provided, when necessary, absolutely without those questions, but what is important is that we ensure that where people should be paying, because they do not have the right to access free care in the health service, they do so.

Jeremy Corbyn: Some of the Prime Minister’s colleagues on the leave side promised £350 million a week extra for the NHS. She does not seem to have answers to the big questions facing Britain. On Monday, the Secretary for Brexit, when questioned about the Government’s approach to single market access, replied:

“We...need hard data about the size of the problem in terms of both money and jobs”—[Official Report, 10 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 50.]

It would have been much easier if he had simply asked his colleague, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, because he would have been able to tell him that the Treasury forecast is a £66 billion loss to the economy—7.5% of the GDP. Can the Prime Minister now confirm that access to the single market is a red line for the Government, or is it not?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman has asked me this question before. [Interruption.] He says it is a simple question, and I will give him the simple answer: what we are going to do is deliver on the vote of the British people to leave the European Union; what we are going to do is be ambitious in our negotiations, to negotiate the best deal for the British people, and that will include the maximum possible access to the European market, for firms to trade with, and operate within, the European market. But I am also clear that the vote of the British people said that we should control the movement of people from the EU into the UK, and, unlike the right hon. Gentleman, we believe we should deliver on what the British people want.

Jeremy Corbyn: Someone once said that in leaving the single market “we risk a loss of investors and businesses...and we risk going backwards when it comes to international trade.” That person is now the Prime Minister, and that was before the referendum.

The Japanese Government wrote to the Prime Minister in September, worried about a shambolic Brexit. Many Japanese companies are major investors in Britain—such as Nissan in Sunderland, which has already halved its investment—and 140,000 people in Britain work for Japanese-owned companies. They have made it clear that those jobs and that investment depend on single market access. What reassurance can she give workers today, desperately worried about their future, their company and their jobs?

The Prime Minister: First, I would say to the right hon. Gentleman that the biggest vote of confidence that we had in Britain after the referendum vote was the £24 billion investment from a Japanese company, SoftBank, in taking over Arm. Secondly, in relation to what we are doing in our negotiations, he does not seem to get what the future is going to be about. The UK will be leaving the European Union. We are not asking ourselves what bits of membership we want to retain. We are saying: what is the right relationship for the UK to have for the maximum benefit of our economy and of the citizens of this country?
Jeremy Corbyn: The right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) has said that
“there is a danger that this Government appear to be turning their back on the single market”.—[Official Report, 10 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 46.]

Staying in the single market was, indeed, a commitment in the Conservative party manifesto. The reality is that, since the Brexit vote, the trade deficit is widening, growth forecasts have been downgraded, the value of the pound is down 16%, and an alliance of the British Chambers of Commerce, the Confederation of British Industry, the British Retail Consortium and the Trades Union Congress have all made representations to the Prime Minister demanding clarity. Is the Prime Minister really willing to risk a shambolic Tory Brexit just to appease the people behind her?

The Prime Minister: What the Conservative party committed to in its manifesto was to give the British people a referendum on whether to stay in the European Union. We gave the British people that vote, and they have given their decision: we will be leaving the European Union. We gave the British people that vote, and that is what matters to companies here in the UK, and that is what we are going to be ambitious about delivering.

Jeremy Corbyn: The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) often has a mot juste to help us in these debates. He simply said—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I want to hear about the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe.

Jeremy Corbyn: In his own inimitable way, the right hon. and learned Gentleman said:
“The reason the pound keeps zooming south is that absolutely nobody has the faintest idea what exactly we’re going to put in place.”

Those of us on the Labour Benches do respect the decision of the British people to leave the European Union, but this is a Government that drew up no plans for Brexit; that now has no strategy for negotiating Brexit; and that offers no clarity, no transparency and no chance of scrutiny of the process for developing a strategy. The jobs and incomes of millions of our people are at stake. The pound is plummeting, business is worrying and the Government have no answers. The Prime Minister says she will not give a running commentary, but is it not time the Government stopped running away from the looming threat to jobs and businesses in this country and to the living standards of millions of people?

The Prime Minister: Unlike the right hon. Gentleman, I am optimistic about the prospects of this country once we leave the European Union; I am optimistic about the trade deals that other countries are now actively coming to us to say they want to make with the United Kingdom; and I am optimistic about how we will be able to ensure that our economy grows outside the European Union. But I have to say to the right hon. Gentleman that Labour did not want a referendum on this issue—we, the Conservatives, gave the British people a referendum; and Labour did not like the result—we are listening to the British people and delivering on that result. [Interruption.] The shadow Foreign Secretary is shouting from a sedentary position. The shadow Foreign Secretary wants a second vote. I have to say to her that I would have thought Labour MPs would have learned this lesson: you can ask the same question again; you still get the answer you don’t want.

Engagements

Q4. [906457] Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Despite several rounds of European regional development funding, the Cornish economy continues to lag about 30% behind the UK average. Does the Prime Minister agree that Brexit provides us with the opportunity to develop our own economic programme, which will be less bureaucratic and more effectively targeted and will offer better value for money for the taxpayer, and will she confirm that her Government will continue to invest in the poorer regions of our country, such as Cornwall, once we leave the EU?

The Prime Minister: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. What I said at our party conference, and have been saying since I became Prime Minister, is that we want an economy that works for everyone; that means for every part of our country, including areas such as Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly. We have already negotiated a devolution deal with Cornwall, which was signed in 2015; that demonstrates that we recognise the challenges that Cornwall faces. We are open to further discussions on ways in which we can improve Cornwall’s economy for the future.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance has found that there are “a number of areas of concern” regarding political discourse and hate speech in the UK, as well as violent racial and religious attacks. Police statistics show a sharp rise in Islamophobic, anti-Semitic and xenophobic assaults over the past year. Does the Prime Minister agree that all mainstream Governments and mainstream political parties should do everything they can to oppose xenophobia and racism?

The Prime Minister: I have been very clear from this Dispatch Box on a number of occasions that there is absolutely no place in our society for racism or hate crime. It is right that the police investigate allegations of hate crime where they occur. I am pleased to say that as Home Secretary I was able to bring in arrangements that improved the recording of hate crime. We also improved the requirement on police specifically to record hate crime relating to faith, so that we can see when Islamophobia is taking place, as well as anti-Semitism and other types of hate crime. There is no place for such crime in our society. With one voice, from across this Chamber, we should make that absolutely clear, and give our police every support in dealing with it.

Angus Robertson: I remind the Prime Minister that when she was Home Secretary she put advertising vans on the streets of this country telling foreigners to go home. At her party conference we heard that her party wishes to register foreigners working in the UK. The crackdown and the rhetoric against foreigners from this
Government have led to even UKIP—UKIP—saying that things have gone too far. Across the length and breadth of this land people are totally disgusted by the xenophobic language of her Government. Will she now confirm that her Government’s intention is still to go ahead with the registration of foreign workers, but that we apparently should not worry, because her Government will keep it secret?

The Prime Minister: May I say very gently to the right hon. Gentleman that I answered two questions on that earlier? I suggest he should have listened to the answers I gave then.

Q5. [906458] Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): We have empowered local doctors to take real leadership over important reconfiguration proposals. In Shropshire, 300 doctors, surgeons and clinicians have been working on a vital reconfiguration of A&E services in Shropshire and in Wales. When they make their decision on that later this month, it is very important that the Government back them and provide the capital funding required for this vital change to enhance patient safety.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important point. The configuration of services in his constituency and others is obviously a significant issue across the House. I am pleased to say that we are now seeing more people being treated in A&E. We will look at the proposals. The point about how this is being done is that local people should be able to have their voice heard and the decisions taken should reflect the needs in a particular local area. We all want to see that. A&E services are vital, and I pay tribute to all those who work in A&E in hospitals across the country.

Q2. [906455] Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The Public Accounts Committee and the Comptroller and Auditor General have both warned that the NHS budget is not sustainable. When will the Prime Minister’s Government wake up to the reality of growing demand, avoid the political rhetoric and set a sustainable NHS budget for this year and the future?

The Prime Minister: The Government took a very simple approach. We asked the NHS itself to propose its five-year plan for the NHS. We asked it how much money it required. It said £8 billion; we are giving it its five-year plan for the NHS. We asked it how much money it required. It said £8 billion; we are giving it £8 billion; we are giving it £8 billion; we are giving it £8 billion; we are giving it £8 billion.

Q7. [906460] Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): A young man with Asperger’s syndrome awaits extradition to the United States to face charges of computer hacking, and is then likely to kill himself. It sounds familiar, but he is not Gary McKinnon, who was saved by the Prime Minister, but Lauri Love, who faces in effect a death sentence. When the Prime Minister introduced the forum bar to, in her words, “provide greater safeguards for individuals”, surely she expected it to protect the vulnerable like Gary McKinnon, like Lauri Love?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend campaigned long and hard for Gary McKinnon, and I obviously took that decision. At that time, it was for the Home Secretary to decide whether there was a human rights case for an individual not to be extradited. We subsequently changed the legal position on that, so this is now a matter for the courts. There are certain parameters that the courts look at in terms of the extradition decision, and that is then passed to the Home Secretary, but it is for the courts to determine the human rights aspects of any case that comes forward. It was right to introduce the forum bar to ensure that challenge on whether cases should be heard here, but the legal process is very clear, and the Home Secretary is part of it.

Q6. [906459] Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): What does the Prime Minister say to British steelworkers who have lost their jobs or whose jobs are threatened, given the news that French steel is to be used for the new replacement Trident submarines? Is that what she means by being a party of the workers?

The Prime Minister: We recognise the concerns of British steelworkers. That is why the Government have worked, under both my predecessor and me, to ensure that we do what we can to promote, encourage and retain a steel industry here in the United Kingdom. A number of measures have been taken. If the hon. Gentleman was in the Chamber earlier for Scottish questions, he will have heard my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland setting them out.

Q8. [906461] Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Doctors and nurses at Kettering general hospital are treating a record number of patients with increasingly world-class treatments, yet despite being located in an area of rapid population and housing growth, owing to an historical anomaly the local clinical commissioning groups are among the most relatively underfunded in the whole country. What can my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister do to help address the situation?

The Prime Minister: As my hon. Friend says, we want to ensure that patients experience the same high-quality care regardless of where they live and wherever they are. That is why, as I understand it, the funding for my hon. Friend’s local clinical commissioning group is being corrected to reflect more accurately the local health need. An investment of more than £757 million will be going into his local area, which shows the Government’s intention to ensure that we see a health service that is working for everyone across the country, but we can do that only with the economy to back up the NHS.

Q10. [906463] Dr Alasdair McDonnell (Belfast South) (SDLP): The Prime Minister will be aware that the soft border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic was vital in boosting the economy of Northern Ireland. Does she understand the confusion that has set in, and that many of us feel? On the one hand, the Government define their intention tightly to control the free movement of people and labour, yet on the other they assure us that that border between Northern Ireland and the Republic will continue to be open. Does she see the contradiction for many of those directly affected, and whose jobs are affected?
The Prime Minister: I have been clear, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has been clear, and the Taoiseach has also said that, on both sides of the border, we do not want to see a return to the borders of the past. It is worth reminding the House that the common travel area has been in place since the 1920s, so it was there well before we were both members of the European Union. We are working with the Government of the Republic, and I have had discussions on this with the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland. We want to ensure that we do not see a return to the borders of the past.

Q9. Andrew Stephenson (Pendle) (Con): Thanks to the Government’s growth deal, the £32 million transformation of Brierfield Mill in my constituency gets under way this week, giving a new lease of life to the largest redundant mill complex in Lancashire. May I thank the Prime Minister for her support and commend Pendle’s other bids in the latest round of the growth deal as a great way to build a country that works for everyone?

The Prime Minister: I commend my hon. Friend for taking his opportunity to support the bids from Pendle. He is absolutely right that the money put in has enabled growth in local projects like Brierfield Mill to be unlocked. We have seen £250 million committed to the Lancashire local enterprise partnership, £2.8 billion to the northern powerhouse through the local growth fund, and the latest round of funding is worth up to £1.8 billion, with good bids coming in from local LEPs. We are assessing the proposals, including those from Pendle. They will be looked at with the seriousness my hon. Friend would expect.

Q11. Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): This is the first Christmas that Hayley Aldirmaz of Pwllheli will not see her husband Hasan. They have been together for 10 years and married for over four, with two young children. It is evident that they are in a long-term relationship, but Hayley’s Turkish husband was refused a spouse visa in 2012 because she earns less than the Home Office threshold of £18,600. Last year, half the full-time workers of Dwyfor Meirionnydd earned only £293 a week or less. This, I might say, compares with the Prime Minister’s own constituency, where the median salary was £571, or almost £30,000 a year. Can the Prime Minister explain why living in Dwyfor Meirionnydd means Hayley has less chance of a proper family life, and will she please help to unite the family this Christmas?

The Prime Minister: I will not comment on the individual case. I know that the hon. Lady sent me the details of this specific case in writing. I will make sure that she gets a full reply from the Immigration Minister. On the broader issue she raises about the income threshold for those wishing to join a partner here in the United Kingdom, the Government asked the independent Migration Advisory Committee to advise on the level of the income threshold. The committee suggested a range of figures and we actually took the lowest figure, £18,600, in that range. It recommended that figure because it is the level at which a British family generally ceases to be able to access income-related benefits, and is able to support themselves and integrate into society. We believe it is important that people coming here are able to support themselves.

Q12. James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): My constituents were delighted to learn this week that Gainsborough’s House, a unique museum and art gallery based in the very building where Gainsborough was born in Sudbury, is to receive almost £5 million of National Lottery funding to become a national cultural attraction. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating the director Mark Bills and his team on their success, and does she agree that if in Suffolk we are bold and positive and go for devolution, we can look forward to much more of this sort of transformative investment in the years to come?

The Prime Minister: I join my hon. Friend in commending all those who have been involved in the bid at Gainsborough’s House. Many people will enjoy visiting Gainsborough’s House in the future as a result of the work that will be able to be done. I know the importance of the Heritage Lottery Fund. It supported the excellent Stanley Spencer gallery in my own constituency, so I have seen the impact it can have. He is absolutely right. The point about devolution deals is people coming together with that ambition for their local area to generate the transformative investment he talks about. Suffolk is looking at the sort of deal it might wish to have locally.

Q14. Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): With Russian and Assad regime warplanes bombing civilians in Aleppo at an unprecedented rate, will the Prime Minister join France in calling for those responsible for these war crimes to be referred to the International Criminal Court? Will she re-examine, with allies, the feasibility of a no-fly zone to protect the Syrian people before it is too late?

The Prime Minister: We are very clear that it is for the courts to decide where a war crime is being committed. We co-sponsored a UN Security Council resolution in May 2014 to refer those responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity in Syria, regardless of affiliation, to the International Criminal Court. Of course, that was vetoed by Russia and China. On the issue of a no-fly zone, this has been addressed. People have looked at this over a number of years. The scenes we see of the indiscriminate slaughter of innocent civilians are absolutely appalling. We want to see an end to that, but there are many questions about a no-fly zone. Who is it there to protect? Would it lead to Assad bombing people in the expectation that they would then move to that zone? How would a safe area actually be enforced there? Who would do that enforcement? There are many questions that need to be looked at in those sorts of issues. What we all know is that the only real solution for peace and stability in Syria is political transition, and it is time Russia accepted that: that the future of Syria is a political transition to a stable Syria, free of Assad.

Q13. Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): At Middlewich High School in my constituency, the most vulnerable pupils and their families are impressively supported, pursuant to the school’s motto of “Achievement for All”. Will the Prime Minister confirm that under her
plans for education, and in a country that works for
everyone, parents can be assured that there will be the
right school place for their child, whatever their ability?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for the
example she has given of the work that is taking place in
her constituency. The whole aim of the Government’s
education policy is to increase the number of good
school places, so parents can have the confidence that
their child will have a good school place and they will
have the school place that is right for them. That is why
we want to see universities more involved in schools,
more faith schools being opened up and the independent
sector helping the state sector where that is sensible and
its expertise can help. And yes, we do want to lift the
ban that currently says that one type of good new
school cannot be opened. It is illegal to open a new
good school that is a selective school. We want to
remove that ban so that pupils of all abilities get the
opportunity.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The
Prime Minister appears to have made a choice, and that
choice is to side with the protectionists and nationalists
who have taken over her party, as surely as Momentum
has taken over the Labour party. She has chosen a hard
Brexit that was never on anybody’s ballot paper and she
has chosen to turn her back on British business in the
process. As a result, petrol and food retailers have warned
of huge price rises at the pumps and on the
supermarket shelves in the coming days. When will she
put the interests of hard-working British people ahead
of an extremist protectionism that absolutely nobody
voted for?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman asks about
who we are siding with. I will tell him who this Government
are siding with. We are siding with the British people,
who voted to leave the European Union. It is high time
the hon. Gentleman listened to the vote of the British
people and accepted that that is exactly what we are
going to do.

Q15. [906468] Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): Does
the Prime Minister share my sadness that the majority
of Banbury’s babies cannot currently be delivered, as I
was, in the Horton general hospital? Will she join me in
using any influence and putting any pressure we can on
the trust to encourage it to recruit the obstetricians we
need to reopen our much valued unit?

The Prime Minister: I have to say to the hon. Lady
that the idea that Parliament was somehow not going to
be able to discuss, debate or question issues around
Brexit is, frankly, completely wrong. Let me provide her
with some examples. The Secretary of State for Exiting
the European Union has already made two statements—and
I believe four hours of questions followed from those. A
new Select Committee has been set up, which crucially
includes representatives from all parts of the United
Kingdom to look at these issues. Only just over a week
ago, I announced that there will be a great repeal Bill in
the next Session to repeal the European Communities
Act 1972. Parliament will thus have every opportunity
to debate this issue.

Will Quince (Colchester) (Con): Every year in the
UK, 3,500 babies are still-born, and I commend the
Government for setting the target of a 20% reduction
by the end of this Parliament and a 50% reduction
by 2030. Does the Prime Minister agree that in Baby Loss
Awareness Week we must do all we can to provide the
best quality bereavement care for those parents who
sadly lose a baby?

The Prime Minister: I think my hon. Friend is absolutely
right, and I am pleased to say that the Health Secretary
will attend the Baby Loss Awareness Week reception,
which will be held in Parliament immediately after
today’s Prime Minister’s Questions. I encourage other
Members to attend it, too. My hon. Friend is absolutely
right that the loss of a baby must be absolutely devastating.
I am aware that some people sitting in this Chamber
have been through that tragedy in their lives. What is
absolutely essential is that the best possible bereavement
care be given to parents at this tragic moment in their
lives when they are at their most vulnerable. That is why
we have provided money to introduce dedicated
bereavement rooms at 40 hospitals, as well as investing
more in improving birthing facilities, which are also
important. Care and counsel for people who have lost a
baby is essential; I think we all accept that.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): On 2 July,
the Home Office was given details of the 178 children
who are still stuck in the Calais refugee camp, but who
had a legal right to be here in the UK with their families
to keep them safe and protected. Given the delays in
acting, what responsibility does the Prime Minister
think this Government have to the 18 of those children
who have now gone missing?

The Prime Minister: Far from not acting, this
Government have been working with the French
Government on dealing with those who are in the
camps. We have put extra resource into speeding up the
process of dealing with the claims of the unaccompanied
children, making that process faster and quicker, with
more children coming here as a result. That is alongside
all the other work we are doing in relation to refugees
and unaccompanied minors. Crucially, of course, we
are also working to ensure that we deal with the traffickers
and the smugglers who are often in the camps; we need
to make sure that they do not have access to children in
the future. We have speeded up the process and more
children are coming here as a result.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): Tomorrow is
secondary breast cancer awareness day, and I would like
to ask the Prime Minister to join me in wishing these
men and women well. Currently, only a third of NHS trusts collect the data in this area. Does my right hon. Friend agree that better data collection can inform diagnosis, treatment and the use of NHS resources across the piece and give better outcomes for all patients?

The Prime Minister: I entirely accept my hon. Friend’s point that better information provides greater opportunity to address these issues. I join her in commending and wishing well all those—as she says, both men and women—who have suffered from breast cancer and who have come through that, as I know my hon. Friend has. Other Members and so many people across the country are in the same position; it is important that they receive the right care so that they can come through that and see a bright future.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Last night, a huge number of MPs presented in this House WASPI—Women Against State Pension Inequality—petitions from towns up and down the country, so will the Prime Minister now commit to overturning those mistaken arrangements of 2011 and provide justice and transitional arrangements for WASPI women?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady should know that transitional arrangements are already in place. We did make changes. We committed £1 billion to lessen the impact of the state pension age changes on those who were affected, so that no one would experience a change of more than 18 months. In fact, 81% of women’s state pension ages will increase by no more than 12 months, compared to the previous timetable.

The Department for Work and Pensions informed people of the change in the state pension age after the changes that were made in 2011. Moreover, in the future women will gain from the new pension arrangements that are being introduced. Women’s pensions are a long-standing issue, but there will be better pension arrangements for them in the future because of the changes that the Government have made.

Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con): I gather that the Prime Minister made Chancellor Merkel a gift of Wainwright’s “Coast to Coast Walk”, which describes the fabulous walk that runs through my constituency. Is she aware that the “coast to coast” is not, in fact, an official national trail, and will she meet me to discuss my campaign to give this national treasure its deserved national status?

The Prime Minister: As my hon. Friend knows, I enjoy walking as well. There are some fantastic walks across the United Kingdom. I have not yet done the “coast to coast” myself, however; there is not much time for me to do it at the moment.

My hon. Friend probably knows that the decision about the designation of the “coast to coast” is more appropriately one for Natural England, and I am sure that he will do all he can to lobby Natural England on the issue.
Points of Order

12.41 pm

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP) rose—

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab) rose—

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I will come to the hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), and indeed, most certainly, to the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) as well. First, I call Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh.

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. On 14 September, the Financial Secretary to the Treasury said at the Dispatch Box, in relation to the debacle that is the handling of tax credits by Concentrix, that people who provided information would receive money in their bank accounts within four working days. It came to my attention on 29 September that that had been changed, and it would be two to three weeks before the information would even be looked at. Furthermore, on 4 October I learned that the four-day system was not even in place.

There are people who are suffering, who cannot feed their children and cannot even send them to school because they do not have money for lunch, and who have to leave their jobs because they cannot afford childcare as a result of this absolute mess. My constituents cannot wait until the next questions session for an answer. Can you advise me, Mr Speaker, on what tools I cannot use to ensure that the Financial Secretary comes to the House and clarifies the Government’s position?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for giving me notice of her point of order.

What Ministers, and other right hon. and hon. Members, say in the House is, of course, their individual responsibility. If a Minister has inadvertently misled the House, I would expect that Minister to correct the record, and I am sure that the Financial Secretary would do so if she felt this to be the case. She will have an opportunity to hear and study what the hon. Lady has said today.

The hon. Lady asked for my advice on how she could hold Ministers to account for their statements on this matter. The answer is that there are a number of routes that she might usefully follow. However, she may particularly wish to note that a debate on the performance of Concentrix in dealing with tax credit claimants, nominated by the Backbench Business Committee, is scheduled to take place next Tuesday at 9.30 am in Westminster Hall. I confidently predict that the hon. Lady will be in Westminster Hall at that time. Although I will not be chairing the debate, because the Speaker does not chair such debates, I have a keen sense that her chances of being heard on that occasion are pretty high. Meanwhile, she has made her concern clear, and it is on the record. We will leave it there for now.

Michael Fabricant: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. During Prime Minister’s Question Time, the Leader of the Opposition very kindly wished me well, and I thank him for that; but he went on to imply that in some way I had received special treatment from the national health service. May I say that that is completely outrageous, and is not the case? Perhaps the Leader of the Opposition would like to clarify the position, or even apologise to me and to the NHS workers who worked so well in providing my care.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I did no such thing during Prime Minister’s Question Time. I wish the hon. Gentleman well, as I wish everyone else well who is being treated in the national health service. I love and value our national health service because it treats everyone equally, gives everyone the best care that it can provide, and gives everyone the best recovery prospects that are available. I meant no such thing, and I think it is unfortunate if the hon. Gentleman thought that I did.

Mr Speaker: We cannot continue the debate, but the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant), who asked his question most powerfully, has raised his concern, to which there has been a response. I cannot be expected to be the arbiter of the respective value of the contributions. The House will be reassured to know that nothing disorderly has occurred.

Emily Thornberry: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I think that the Prime Minister, who has just left the Chamber, asserted that I was in favour of a second Brexit referendum. I have never been, and I am not. I just wanted to set the record straight, and I hoped that she would be able to hear me do so, but unfortunately we have just missed her.

Mr Speaker: That is not a point of order for the Chair. It is, however, very interesting, notably to the hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry). Because I take an anorakish interest in the pronouncements of each and every Member, it is also of considerable interest to me, so I am very grateful to her for what she has said.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: The day would not be complete without a point of order from the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant).

Chris Bryant: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I know that you take very seriously your responsibility for protecting the rights of the House. I do not know whether you ever consult Facebook, but if you were to do so, you would find that George Galloway, a former Member of Parliament, still describes himself as a Member of Parliament. Would it not be in the interests of the House to make it absolutely clear to Facebook that he is not a Member of Parliament and should not be claiming that privilege?

Mr Speaker: It is not my responsibility, but I am perfectly willing to write. He cannot currently be heard in this place. When he was here, he was heard—fully, sometimes loudly and with very considerable eloquence—but he is no longer a Member of Parliament and I am happy to put that on record. If there continues to be ambiguity, or if misleading impressions are given, they must be corrected.
Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am looking for advice on how to hold the Government to account and get answers from Ministers. On 22 June, I sent a letter on behalf of a constituent to the then Home Secretary. When I got no response, I followed it up but was advised that my letter could not be found. It was then resubmitted to the new Home Secretary on 16 August, but I am still awaiting a response. Similarly, in June I was given notice of a ministerial visit from the Scottish Secretary and told that if I wanted information on the visit, I should respond to the email. I did so immediately, asking what the purpose of the visit was. I am still waiting to hear. Luckily, I was able to find the answer from other sources. Those two examples are unacceptable, and I would appreciate your advice on this matter.

Mr Speaker: My initial advice would have been to tell the hon. Gentleman to make his point in the presence of the Leader of the House, but he seems to have anticipated me. That is exactly what he has done, and the Leader of the House was listening intently as he raised his concern. There is a responsibility on Ministers to provide timely and substantive answers to questions. Previously, Leaders of the House have chased Government Departments that have fallen down in that regard, and knowing the esteem in which the present Leader of the House holds this place, I know that he will do the same. I hope that that will broker a step change in performance to the satisfaction of the hon. Gentleman.

Stalking (Sentencing)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

12.48 pm

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): I beg to move, That leave be given to bring in a Bill to increase the maximum sentences available to the court for stalking offences; and for connected purposes.

Stalking is a horrible, violating crime. It rips relationships apart, destroys careers, and can cause lasting mental harm. All too often it is the gateway to serious violence. Put bluntly, it shatters lives. Yet, despite the vital progress made by the coalition Government in criminalising stalking in 2012, the sentencing powers available to the courts to protect victims remain wholly inadequate. It is high time that we did something about it.

I began this campaign, together with my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham), after learning what had happened to one of my constituents, a GP living in Cheltenham and working in Gloucester. Over the course of seven years, Dr Eleanor Aston suffered a horrific ordeal at the hands of her former patient. He turned up at her surgery more than 100 times. He posted foul items through the letter box. He followed her on patient visits, slashed her tyres and sent threatening mail. He even appeared at a children’s birthday party her daughter was attending. It caused exceptional anxiety and fear.

After serving a short prison sentence, and in a pattern that is not uncommon in this type of offence, he restarted his campaign. Dr Aston received packages at her surgery in Gloucester and her home in Cheltenham. One was threatening and abusive and made it clear he knew where her children went to school. The second package simply read, “Guess who’s back”. When he was arrested again, a search on his computer revealed the enquiry, “How long after a person disappears are they assumed dead?”.

The effect on Dr Aston was profound. She was advised by police to change her name and job, and move address. It was suggested that she should come off the General Medical Council register. At one point, she had to leave work and developed post-traumatic stress disorder.

How did the criminal justice system protect her? It is clear that the judge himself thought that he did not have the tools he needed. When passing sentence at Gloucester Crown court for the second time, the judge stated to the stalker:

“I have no doubt at all that you are dangerous in the sense that you pose a significant risk to her in future in terms of causing her serious harm... I am frustrated that the maximum sentence... is five years. I would, if I could, give you longer.”

Therein lies the problem.

In practice, a five-year maximum means that a stalker who pleads guilty in the face of overwhelming evidence for the worst imaginable offence will serve just 18 to 20 months. In reality, sentences are far shorter than the maximum—typically around 10 months. That means stalkers are out in five, often unreformed, untreated and ready to carry on where they left off.

There are three central reasons why the law needs to be changed. First, the most fundamental imperative is to protect the victim. In a digital age, there is more opportunity than ever to terrorise victims and make
their lives a misery. Anonymous accounts can be used to send threatening messages. In one case I am aware of, the stalker set up a fake Facebook profile in the name of the victim’s dead father. In another, the stalker created an account to impersonate the victim—a successful author—and used it to send abusive messages to work colleagues.

What has shone out from the conversations I have had with victims is not just the extent to which they are devastated and consumed by their ordeal, but the extent to which they can only truly get on with their lives when they have the reassurance of knowing that their stalker cannot come and hurt them. One can see their anxiety ratchet up with each day as the release date gets closer.

The fact is that courts frequently sentence repeat offenders. The fixation and obsession associated with this offence mean that offenders often ignore repeated warnings handed down by the police or the courts and often ignore short sentences. According to Paladin, the stalking charity, 42% of those convicted and subject to a restraining order go on to reoffend. The courts need powers that enable them to reflect that in the length of the sentence for a repeat offender.

The second reason is the need for rehabilitation. Ultimately, I want to see prison sentences that reform the offender and address the underlying obsession in an effective way. However, the evidence from psychiatrists that emerged in our report suggests that repeat short sentences do not have that effect. Instead, they can make things worse. Resentment can fester, ready to burst out on release. Longer sentences, in appropriate cases, can provide the prison system with greater opportunity to rehabilitate and treat stalkers.

The third point is that the five-year maximum makes no sense when compared with other offences. To put it in perspective, the equivalent maximum for shoplifting is seven years—two years longer. For fraud, it is 10 years; for burglary, another violating offence, it is 14 years; and for street robbery, it is life. Despite stalking being such a violating, intrusive crime and despite it having the capacity to do such significant physical and mental harm, it is still treated as a minor offence. That will not do. At the very least, the maximum needs to be increased to 10 years’ imprisonment.

The call for greater sentencing powers for judges has been backed by charities, criminologists and victims’ groups, as well as by MPs and peers from all parties. As for the judiciary, one recently retired circuit judge, his honour Judge Wade, was quoted in our report this year as saying:

“I entirely agree that the present sentencing regime for this often very worrying offence is quite unsatisfactory. I consider that Parliament must revisit this matter soon…Stalkers can be dangerous and delusional, and their often unpredictable behaviour can easily escalate to serious or even fatal violence.”

It is clear that the Government get this point. While she was Home Secretary, the Prime Minister stated:

“Offenders need to know that they will be brought to justice for making others’ lives a misery. We will do all we can to protect victims of stalking more effectively and to end this appalling crime.”

The previous Prime Minister, in answer to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) at Prime Minister’s questions, called stalking a “dreadful crime”. It is therefore no surprise that the coalition did more than any Government in history to tackle the menace of stalking, including by creating a specific offence in 2012, but there is still more to do.

For as long as the courts are left in a sentencing straitjacket and forced to treat this as a minor crime, victims will not be properly protected. The task falls to those of us in this Chamber at this time to get on and finish the job.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Alex Chalk, Richard Graham, Jim Dowd, Liz Saville Roberts, Sir Henry Bellingham, Robert Neill, Victoria Prentis, Michelle Donelan, Liz McInnes, Rishi Sunak, Caroline Ansell and Dr Sarah Wollaston present the Bill.

Alex Chalk accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 28 October, and to be printed (Bill 74).
Opposition Day

Parliamentary Scrutiny of Leaving the EU

Mr Speaker: I inform the House that I have selected amendment (b) in the name of the Prime Minister.

12.57 pm

Keir Starmer (Holborn and St Pancras) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House recognises that leaving the EU is the defining issue facing the UK; believes that there should be a full and transparent debate on the Government’s plan for leaving the EU; and calls on the Prime Minister to ensure that this House is able properly to scrutinise that plan for leaving the EU before Article 50 is invoked.

I will start with something I think we can all agree on. The decisions that will be taken by the Government over the next few months and years in relation to exiting the EU will have profound implications for the future of this country, its economy, its people and its place in the world. We have probably not seen a set of such significant decisions since the end of the second world war. Today’s debate is about the proper role of Parliament, and this House in particular, throughout that process. It is about scrutiny and accountability.

There was one question on the ballot paper on 23 June: “Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?” The majority of those voting voted to leave. That result has to be accepted and respected, notwithstanding the fact that many of us, including myself, campaigned for remain. However, that is not the end of the matter. The next question, and one that is increasingly pressing, is: on what terms should we leave the EU? That question was not on the ballot paper. Nor was it addressed in the Conservative party’s 2015 manifesto—there was no plan B in the event of the referendum concluding with a leave vote. Nor did the Prime Minister set out her terms for Brexit before assuming office, because of the nature of the exercise by which she assumed that office. Nor do we have a White Paper setting out the proposed terms of our exit and also national interest. I come from a business background, and I would love to get a degree of flexibility that must be there in any negotiation. Of course the starting position may not be the end position. We all have a duty to ensure that we get the right result for the country.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I do hope that Labour is going to set out how it would handle the negotiations.

Keir Starmer: I would happily swap places with the Secretary of State and play a part in the negotiations, but we are not in government—

Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con) rose—

Keir Starmer: I can only give way to one person at a time.

Rishi Sunak: The hon. and learned Gentleman mentioned the terms of our exit and also national interest. I come from a business background, and I would love to get a sense of his approach to a successful negotiation. Does he believe that the national interest would be best served by the Government coming to this place and explaining in precise detail all their negotiating positions before we have even walked into the room?

Keir Starmer: I will deal with that, because that is an essential question that we need to discuss. In a sense, this should not be about point scoring across the House.

Several hon. Members rose—

Keir Starmer: I will not give way, no. We are debating a fundamental question, which is whether the basic plans for the negotiating position will be put before the House. That really matters. Of course there is a degree of detail that cannot be discussed. Of course there is a degree of flexibility that must be there in any negotiation. Of course the starting position may not be the end position. We all accept that; we are all grown up. The question here is whether the basic terms should be put before the House.
There are two aspects to today's debate. Partly, there is the political aspect: what is the role of Parliament. There is also the question of uncertainty. It is absolutely clear that, across business, across EU citizens and across the population as a whole, there is great uncertainty about what the plans are, and that uncertainty simply cannot be kept in place for the next three years. It is growing uncertainty.

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention. There are two aspects to today's debate. Partly, there is the political aspect: what is the role of Parliament. There is also the question of uncertainty. It is absolutely clear that, across business, across EU citizens and across the population as a whole, there is great uncertainty about what the plans are, and that uncertainty simply cannot be kept in place for the next three years. It is growing uncertainty.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): Like the hon. Member for Richmond (Yorks) (Rishi Sunak), I also have a business background, as of course does the director general of the CBI, Carolyn Fairbairn, who said: “At the moment if the commentary was to read into what we’ve heard so far, it’s that we’re heading to something of a cliff edge in two and a half years.”

Does my hon. and learned Friend recognise, as I do, that there are many people in business who are very, very concerned about the lack of commentary and lack of direction from the Government?

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention. There are two aspects to today’s debate. Partly, there is the political aspect: what is the role of Parliament. There is also the question of uncertainty. It is absolutely clear that, across business, across EU citizens and across the population as a whole, there is great uncertainty about what the plans are, and that uncertainty simply cannot be kept in place for the next three years. It is growing uncertainty.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Will the hon. and learned Gentleman set out for the House what scrutiny there was when the Lisbon treaty was ratified under the Gordon Brown Government?

Keir Starmer: There is different scrutiny for different treaties and provisions. One example is the scrutiny that was provided in relation to the original decision to go into the European Economic Community, because then, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman knows, Command Papers were put before the House. An economic impact assessment was also put before the House, and some of the Command Papers were voted on. The idea that scrutiny cannot be done and that it was not done in the past is wrong.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): My hon. and learned Friend mentions uncertainty. I have been contacted by a business in my constituency that has, until recently, been growing very rapidly, and had plans to announce a £100,000 expansion this autumn. That has now been cancelled because of the uncertainty about our future in the single market and because of what it sees as the Government’s headlong rush to a hard Brexit. What can he say about Labour’s position to reassure those businesses across the whole of Britain that are worried about our future in the single market?

Keir Starmer: The priority should be the economy and jobs, which means access to the single market.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con) rose—

Claire Perry (Devizes) (Con) rose—

Keir Starmer: I will make some progress if I may. I have only got to page 2, and I have taken about 10 interventions already. If Members will bear with me, I will press on.

On Monday, the Secretary of State confirmed that the Prime Minister will invoke article 50 no later than the end of March next year. Unless Parliament has a meaningful role in shaping the terms of Brexit between now and then—a maximum period of just five-and-a-half months—it will be too late. I can see what will happen. Once the negotiating process has started, there will be a claim by the Secretary of State that it would be inappropriate to put anything before the House by way of detail. Once the process is over, the risks of any debate will be purely academic.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): On a point of information, that is not correct. I have already said that it is not correct. In talking to the Lords Committee in September, I said that the House would have at least the information available to the European Parliament. What the hon. and learned Gentleman says is just not the case.

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention. I read the transcript of the Secretary of State’s evidence to that Select Committee. What was put to him was that, on one view, the European Parliament would have more answers than this Parliament. In 2010, as he knows, there was a framework agreement between the Commission and the European Parliament. It states:

“There is different scrutiny for different treaties and provisions. One example is the scrutiny that was provided in relation to the original decision to go into the European Economic Community, because then, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman knows, Command Papers were put before the House. An economic impact assessment was also put before the House, and some of the Command Papers were voted on. The idea that scrutiny cannot be done and that it was not done in the past is wrong.

That goes a long way further than I understood the Secretary of State’s position to be on Monday, and in his first statement, I would be very pleased to hear from him if he can confirm now that at least that part of scrutiny is guaranteed.

Mr Davis: I can.

Keir Starmer: Thank you.

This is a matter not just of process, but of real substance. Both those who voted to leave the EU and those who voted to remain recognise that different negotiating stances under article 50 could provide radically different outcomes, each of which carries very significant risks and opportunities. That is undoubtedly why there is a keen debate going on behind the scenes on the Government’s side. Everybody recognises the potential consequences of adopting the wrong opening stance.

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): My hon. and learned Friend is making an excellent case. Does he agree that the British people may have voted to leave the European Union, but what they did not vote for is for their food to become more expensive, for the wages of low-paid workers to be hit and for jobs to be lost in the manufacturing, agricultural and banking sectors, which is what we are in danger of if we choose the wrong exit from the European Union.

Keir Starmer: I agree, and that is what is causing such great anxiety around the country. I doubt whether any Member has not been approached by constituents, either individuals or businesses, with real concerns about the situation. There are different concerns—

Several hon. Members rose—

Keir Starmer: I am halfway through a sentence. There are different concerns from different businesses and different individuals. I certainly have not met anyone without them—if there are MPs who have, well, so be
Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I am sure that I am not alone in having many representations from individuals among the millions of EU citizens living in this country and, of course, Britons living abroad who are deeply insecure about their position. Does my hon. and learned Friend agree that it is deplorable to discuss those individuals in terms of being bargaining chips and cards that we need to play in negotiations? Do we not need to make a priority of ensuring that those individuals, with their businesses and their lives, have the security that they deserve?

Keir Starmer: My hon. Friend makes a very good point, and again, many of us have had anxious conversations with EU citizens who simply want to know what their position is and want some guarantees about the future.

I will make some progress. Some models for exiting have been much discussed. The most cited are the Norwegian model, the Swiss model, the Turkish model and the Canadian model. It is unlikely that any deal reached between the UK and the EU will replicate any of those models—nor should it—but in negotiating our future relationship with the EU, the Government will be defining the future of our country, so the terms matter hugely. It is frankly astonishing that the Government propose to devise the negotiating terms of our exit from the EU, then to negotiate and then to reach a deal, without a vote in this House. This is where my opening remarks become important because, in the absence of anything in the manifesto, in the absence of anything on the referendum ballot form and in the absence of any words from the Prime Minister before she assumed office, where is the mandate? Nobody—public or in the House—

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): The referendum.

Keir Starmer: No, the referendum is not the mandate for the terms. We have been round this block and everybody understands the distinction. I have stood here and accepted that there is a mandate for exit. There is no mandate for the terms. It has never been put to the country; it has not even been put to the Secretary of State’s political party; and it has not been put to the House. Where is the mandate on the terms?

Mr Kenneth Clarke: Reference has been made to the Lisbon treaty, which may provide a rather useful precedent. Is the hon. and learned Gentleman aware that the policy on that treaty was debated repeatedly on the Floor of the House, beginning with the abortive European constitution. The then Government were accountable to the House for the view that they were taking towards the treaty, and the treaty itself was then debated for days on end on the Floor of the House, with repeated votes at several stages in that process. Nobody mentioned the words “royal prerogative” throughout the entire process.

Keir Starmer: It will come on to the prerogative, and I think that the treaty was debated for at least 20 days.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Is not the prerogative absolutely key here? In 1924, when there was a Labour Government, we insisted that all treaties would be laid before the House for 21 days, so that the House and the House of Lords could take a view on them. That was the Ponsonby rule. When there was a Conservative Government, they got rid of it. When there was a Labour Government again in 1929, we put it back, and in 2010, we put it on the statute book. Is it not really worrying that Ministers have been going to the House of Lords and this Chamber and relying solely on the prerogative in relation to treaties?

Keir Starmer: It is, and I will deal with the prerogative in some detail because it is not fixed. The prerogative changes over time, and in any event, even if it may legally allow the Executive to proceed without scrutiny and accountability in the House, it does not prevent that scrutiny and accountability. It does not require the Government to proceed in that way. It is being used as a cloak to avoid the scrutiny that is needed.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): Some of us were here during the Maastricht treaty debates, when there were many votes and the Government forces of the day were brilliantly whipped by the present Secretary for Brexit in favour of the Maastricht treaty. Just to be quite clear, is the hon. and learned Gentleman—I am very much minded to support his motion—calling for a vote, not just an examination, on the terms before we send the Secretary of State off to negotiate?

Keir Starmer: Absolutely, but I take this in two stages because both are important. Scrutiny—putting the plans before the House—really matters. There is a separate argument about a vote, and I say that there should be a vote, but we must not get to a situation where, to resist the vote, the Secretary of State will not even put the plans before the House.

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Con): Is not the convention very clearly established that a major treaty change has to be triggered by an affirmative resolution of the House? The fact that that may only be a convention is still something that must be respected. After all, there are lots of conventions, such as the convention that a Government resign if they lose a vote of no confidence. That is no more than a convention, but Members might be a bit surprised if a Government were not to go in those circumstances.

Keir Starmer: The prerogative has come up so often that I will deal with it now in substance. Prerogative powers, of course, developed at a time when the monarch was both a feudal lord and Head of State. That is the origin of prerogative powers, but they have changed over time, yielding where necessary to the demands of democratic accountability. There are plenty of examples, as the Secretary of State will know, in the courts of that change in accountability, but there is also the example of the prerogative power to commit troops in armed conflict. In theory, the Prime Minister and the Cabinet retain the constitutional right to decide when and where
to authorise action, but in practice Governments in recent times have ensured parliamentary debate and a vote.

Responding to the Chilcot report earlier this year, the then Prime Minister made the point during Prime Minister’s questions when he said:

“I think we have now got a set of arrangements and conventions that put the country in a stronger position. I think it is now a clear convention that we have a vote in this House, in which of course we did on Iraq, before premeditated military action.”—[Official Report, 6 July 2016; Vol. 612, c. 881.]

A strong political convention modifying the prerogative has thus been set.

Mr Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Will the hon. and learned Gentleman give way?

Keir Starmer: I will just complete this section on the prerogative.

The underlying premise of the development of the prerogative is clear and obvious. The more significant the decision in question and the more serious the possible consequences, the greater the need for meaningful parliamentary scrutiny. That lies at the heart of this, and it is hard to think of a more significant set of decisions with very serious possible consequences than the terms on which we leave the EU.

I will press this point because all this is well known to the Secretary of State. After all, he tabled a ten-minute rule Bill in June 1999 that was concerned with “the exercise of certain powers of Ministers of the Crown subject to control by the House of Commons”.

I shall quote his approach to the prerogative. When he introduced that Bill on 22 June 1999, the right hon. Gentleman, now of course the Secretary of State, said:

“Executive decisions by the Government should be subject to the scrutiny and approval of Parliament in many other areas… The Bill sets out to…make”

the prerogative “subject to parliamentary approval, giving Parliament the right of approval over all Executive powers not conferred by statute—from the ratification of treaties to the approval of Orders in Council, and from the appointment of European Commissioners, some ambassadors, members of the Bank of England”—[Official Report, 22 June 1999; Vol. 333, c. 931.]

So he has changed his position. Back then, he recognised that the prerogative ought to be subject to Parliament. It was 20 years ago, but progressive movement with the prerogative is usually in favour of greater accountability, not less, so the fact that he argued that 20 years ago is not an argument against doing it now. That Bill did not proceed, but the principles are clear and set out. The prerogative is not fixed; parliamentary practice and convention can change the prerogative, and have done so in a number of ways. In any event, I fall back on my primary point: even if the prerogative permits the Government to withhold the plans from Parliament, it does not require them to, and political accountability requires the Government to put their plans before Parliament.

Mr Jenkin: The hon. and learned Gentleman misses one rather important fact: there has been a vote of the British people—a vote delegated to them by the terms of the European Union Referendum Act 2015. This is the question that he has to answer: suppose there was a vote in this House; how would he vote? Would he vote against article 50 invocation, or in favour? Just give a straight answer to that.

Keir Starmer: I will not take long responding to that, because I have made the point, which is that the mandate on 23 June was not a mandate as to the terms, and I think that most people understand that; I cannot put it any clearer than that.

There is the question of how Members would vote, what they would vote on, and what happens if Parliament does not like the terms. The Secretary of State, in his statement on 5 September, emphasised that he would consult widely, including the devolved countries, which of course are very important in all this, and which deserve scrutiny of how exit will impact each of them. He also said he would “strive to build national consensus around our approach.”—[Official Report, 5 September 2016; Vol. 614, c. 38.]

The question for the Secretary of State is: how will he build consensus around his approach if he will not tell the House what his approach is?

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The hon. and learned Gentleman is, of course, a first-rate lawyer of international renown, and it is a real pleasure to hear him develop his argument. I am interested in what he said about the devolved Administrations. Does he agree that the Scottish Government and other devolved Administrations should have a central role in negotiations on the UK’s terms for exiting the European Union, and will he and his party throw their weight behind that argument?

Keir Starmer: I do agree with that, absolutely, and we will throw our weight behind it. In fairness, the Prime Minister signalled that by her early visits as soon as she assumed office. I was hesitant to answer that question in case I got relegated from second to third or even fourth-rate lawyer. I will press on—

Mr David Davis rose—

Keir Starmer—unless the Secretary of State is about to give me a ranking.

Mr Davis: I was just about to say that the hon. and learned Gentleman will remember from Monday that I reiterated the support for his standing as a lawyer.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con) rose—

Keir Starmer: I give way.

Hon. Members: Apologise!

Mr Duncan Smith: I am going to. May I unreservedly withdraw the allegation that I made on Monday, only on the basis that it was clumsy? It was not meant about him; it was meant about advice. I do not for one moment doubt the hon. and learned Gentleman’s capabilities as a lawyer.
Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that, and I assure the right hon. Gentleman and the House that I was not in the slightest bit concerned, though I am very grateful to so many people who were concerned. I consider the matter closed.

Several hon. Members rose—

Keir Starmer: I will press on, because I am conscious that many people want to participate in the debate.

Mr Duncan Smith rose—

Keir Starmer: I hope that I am not going to get relegated straight away.

Mr Duncan Smith: The hon. and learned Gentleman said that it was important for the Government to come before Parliament, specifically to lay out their negotiating position. He says that there was a simple question on the ballot paper on whether we should leave the European Union or not. Will he tell us what the simple definition is of leaving the European Union? Is it the non-application of European law?

Keir Starmer: No. There are very different models for leaving. We have to be clear about what is actually happening, because that is important when we come to the point about treaties; we are leaving one treaty and almost certainly signing new treaties, so this is not just about exiting one treaty. I have not yet met anybody who suggests that there should be no relationship between the UK and the EU. [Interruption.] No, seriously, speaking as someone who has spent five years dealing with counter-terrorism and serious criminal offences across Europe, it is inconceivable that we will not sign new treaties with the EU; to do otherwise would undermine our security.

Several hon. Members rose—

Keir Starmer: I will press on, because I am conscious that very many people want to come in on this debate, and I have sat on the Back Benches and been irritated by Front Benchers taking up all the time.

We are talking about a matter of parliamentary sovereignty, but this is not just a political point, albeit an important political point. By proceeding in this closed and secretive manner, the Government are causing huge anxiety. In the 2015 Conservative manifesto, there was a commitment to “safeguard British interests in the Single Market”, yet in recent weeks, the Government have emphasised that membership of the single market may not be a priority for Brexit negotiations. On Monday, the Secretary of State said that it was “not necessary” for the UK to remain a member of the single market. Then there was a telling exchange between him and my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), who put to him the words of the Foreign Secretary on EU citizens. The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union answered—I will give the full answer, because I was struck by this at the time—as follows: “The simple answer is that we will seek to get the most open, barrier-free market that we can. That will be as good as a single market.”—[Official Report, 10 October 2016, Vol. 613, c. 65.]

It is always hard to know when the Secretary of State is busking, but if that is the position, that is a significant statement and position, and it elides with the approach apparently taken by the Prime Minister, who increasingly appears to have extrapolated from the leave vote that there is an overwhelming case for a hard Brexit that does not prioritise jobs or the strength of our economy.

Claire Perry: I congratulate the hon. and learned Gentleman on taking a factual tone in this important debate. I would like to reassure him that many of us on the Government Benches will do all we can to preserve the benefits of access to the single market for our local businesses. May I remind him that seven out of 10 Members from his party represent constituencies that voted to leave the EU? The pragmatic, rather than procedural, approach is in the Government’s amendment, which suggests that it would be negotiating madness for this House to give blow-by-blow scrutiny to the terms of exit. Why does he not vote for the Government’s amendment, which achieves what we all want—not a hard or a soft Brexit, but a smart Brexit?

Keir Starmer: I am grateful for that intervention, and for the indications about the single market. I know that there is a lot of shared concern across the House about the terms of exit. Obviously, I have looked at the amendment; may I make it plain that nothing in the motion is intended to undermine or frustrate the vote on 23 June, or frustrate the negotiations? We all understand that negotiations have to take place. There will of course have to be a degree of confidentiality, but that does not prevent the plans—the basic outline and broad terms—being put before the House. That is why I am waiting to hear what the Secretary of State says. I heard the tail end of Prime Minister’s questions, and the Prime Minister indicated that we have had two statements from the Secretary of State, and there was a Select Committee—

Mr Jackson: Two Select Committees.

Keir Starmer: I said two statements. [Interruption.] Oh, two Select Committees; well, whatever. If all the amendment means is that we will get similar statements to the two that we have already had, that does not give me much comfort. If we will get more than that, then we shall see.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I am grateful to the hon. and learned Gentleman for giving way, and for some of the points that he has made. Will he use this opportunity to outline clearly the Labour party’s position on single market membership? Yesterday in the Evening Standard, there was a warning from the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, against a “hard Brexit”, and he has said that a departure from the single market would be “deeply irresponsible”.

I agree fully. Two weeks ago, in the National Assembly for Wales, we had the Labour Government voting with the Tories and the UK Independence party against single market membership. What is the Labour party’s policy on single market membership?

Keir Starmer: Best access to the single market.

I was on the subject of uncertainty. There has been understandable uncertainty in business, universities, and trades unions, and among investors, including among people on both sides of the referendum divide. The head of the CBI has warned that hard Brexit could “close the door on an open economy”.

"close the door on an open economy"
**Keir Starmer**

An open letter signed by business leaders cautioned last week that leaving the EU without any preferential trade arrangement and defaulting to trading by...WTO rules would have significant costs for British exporters and importers.

It is not just institutions that are concerned. So far, the Government have made broad statements on the principle of protecting the rights of EU citizens already living here. In his statement to the House on Monday, the Secretary of State suggested that the Government are doing everything possible to underwrite and guarantee the position of EU citizens resident in the UK, and at the same time seeking to do the same with British nationals living in other parts of the EU. That constructive tone is at odds with statements made by other Government Ministers, most notably the Secretary of State for International Trade. Speaking at an event at the Conservative conference in Birmingham last week, he told party members that “we would like to be able to give a reassurance to EU nationals in the United Kingdom”, but that depended on the way in which other countries proceeded. He said that “to give that away before we get into the negotiation would be to hand over one of our main cards”. That is treating EU citizens as bargaining chips. That is one of protecting the rights of EU citizens already living in other parts of the EU, and at the position of EU citizens resident in the UK, and at the same time seeking to do the same with British nationals living in other parts of the EU. That constructive tone is at odds with statements made by other Government Ministers, most notably the Secretary of State for International Trade. Speaking at an event at the Conservative conference in Birmingham last week, he told party members that “we would like to be able to give a reassurance to EU nationals in the United Kingdom”, but that depended on the way in which other countries proceeded. He said that “to give that away before we get into the negotiation would be to hand over one of our main cards”. That is treating EU citizens as bargaining chips. That is not good enough: many EU citizens have been in the UK for years or even decades, and they deserve better treatment.

The Government should end this uncertainty in the market and among the people. They should set out their plans before the House at the earliest opportunity. We accept that concern about immigration and freedom of movement was an important issue in the referendum and that, in light of the result, adjustments to the freedom of movement principle have to be part of the negotiating process. We must establish fair migration rules as part of our new relationship with the EU, but no one voted on 23 June to take an axe to the economy. Striking that balance and navigating our exit from the EU will not be an easy process, and it will require shrewd negotiating. The Government must not give up on the best possible deal for Britain before they have even begun. They must put the national interest first and not bow to pressure from Back Benchers for a hard Brexit. That means prioritising access to the single market, protecting workers’ rights, ensuring that common police and security measures are not weakened, and ensuring that all sectors of our economy are able to trade with our most important market. It also means bringing the British people together as we set about leaving the EU.

I touched on the tone of discussions on Monday. Many people are appalled at the language that has been used in relation to exiting the EU. An essential step in that process is to publish the basic plans for Brexit and to seek the confidence of the House of Commons. The motion is intended to ensure that scrutiny and accountability. I will listen, of course, to what the Secretary of State says about his amendment.

**Mr David Davis:** On a point of information, does the motion require the guarantee of a vote? Is he after a prior vote?

**Keir Starmer:** The motion before the House is clear about scrutiny, which is the first part. There is a question of a vote, and I will make it absolutely clear that I am pressing for a vote. This exercise will obviously go on for some time, and we will have plenty of skirmishes. I am anxious that, first, we have proper scrutiny and also a vote. What I do not want to do is jeopardise the scrutiny by a vote against the vote. Anyone on either side of the House who wants scrutiny can happily support the motion, and I will listen carefully to what the Secretary of State says about the amendment.

This is a serious challenge, and these are the most important decisions for a generation. The role of the House is a fundamentally important issue, and we have to ensure that it is compatible with scrutiny and accountability.

1.35 pm

**The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis):** Another day, another outing. [Interruption.] I knew they would like that.

**Mr Speaker:** For the avoidance of doubt—to be absolutely clear for the benefit of all Members, the Secretary of State will move the amendment.

**Mr Davis:** I beg to move amendment (b), at end add ‘; and believes that the process should be undertaken in such a way that respects the decision of the people of the UK when they voted to leave the EU on 23 June and does not undermine the negotiating position of the Government as negotiations are entered into which will take place after Article 50 has been triggered.’.

I am glad to hear that the Labour spokesman accepts that we must respect the decision of the people. That is important progress. Of course, it comes from somewhere, but where is not at all clear. I will come back to that in less than a minute. He went on to say that he did not want to see point scoring, and I rather agree: this issue is too important for point scoring.

The House should know that this morning I received a letter, signed by the shadow Secretary of State and his predecessor, which was extremely flattering about my history of standing up for the rights of Parliament and so on. It went on to pose 170 questions about our negotiating strategy. To give the House an idea of how much of a stunt that is, it is one question a day between...
now until the triggering of article 50. Worse still, some of the questions in that long list are requests pre-emptively to concede elements of our negotiating strategy.

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way—the shadow Secretary of State would not give way—so I can now ask my question. I have listened carefully to the debate. The shadow Secretary of State talked about respecting the vote on 23 June, which made it clear that we are to leave the European Union. We cannot leave the EU without triggering article 50, when the negotiations will begin and the details that he wants to scrutinise will emerge. Should it not be the Government's right to trigger article 50 as the instruction of the British people to go ahead, and then we begin the negotiation?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is exactly right. That is the premise on which we are advancing. That is not to say—[Interruption.] If the hon. Member for Chesterfield (Toby Perkins) waits a moment, I will give way. We will have proper scrutiny, and I will deal with that in a minute. We will not allow anyone to veto the decision of the British people—that is the point.

Toby Perkins: If it is really the case that article 50 is the start of the process and we begin scrutiny after that, why is it being triggered nine months after the vote? Surely that is because a huge amount of preparatory work is required, and that is what we want to scrutinise.

Mr Davis: It is because it takes a little while to prepare the negotiating strategy—a point to which I shall return.

Alex Salmond rose—

Mr Davis: I will give way to my old friend.

Alex Salmond: If there is no parliamentary assent for the negotiating position that the Secretary of State takes into the negotiations, how can there possibly be parliamentary assent for the result of the negotiations, unless he pulls off the remarkable trick of getting a better deal than he is asking for?

Mr Davis: I will go through the stages of assent later—the right hon. Gentleman makes a reasonable point. I am determined—[Interruption.] I will give way once more, but then I must make progress.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): As a long-standing Brexiteer not wishing to make points, may I take the Secretary of State back to the reasons the Government want to trigger article 50 so early? What is behind that, and is there any possibility that that statement might take on the colour of the Home Secretary's statement about foreign workers?

Mr Davis: No, I do not think so. The right hon. Gentleman asks a serious question. Part of the reasoning is that the Prime Minister feels, quite reasonably, that the people want the process to be under way. Indeed, if one believes opinion polls, that is what is going on. However, we do not want to do it immediately, unlike the leader of the Labour party, who said on 24 June that we should trigger it immediately—of course, now he has changed his mind. What we are doing is putting together our negotiating strategy, which requires an enormous amount of work—I will come back to that point—and some of it will become public as we go along.

I am determined, as would be expected, that Parliament will be fully and properly engaged in the discussion on how we make a success of Brexit. I therefore broadly welcome the motion, but with important caveats, and that is why the Government's amendment is necessary. The first key point is that we must ensure that the decision that the people made on 23 June is fully respected. We also need to be explicit that, while we welcome parliamentary scrutiny, it must not be used as a vehicle to undermine the Government's negotiating position or thwart the process of exit—both are important.

The negotiation will be complex and difficult, and we should do nothing to jeopardise it. As I said in my statement on Monday—the hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) quoted me several times—the sovereignty of Parliament and its restoration is at the very heart of why the UK is withdrawing from the European Union. For decades, the primacy of the UK Parliament has been superseded by decisions made within EU institutions, but now, following the clear instruction of the voters in the referendum on 23 June, we can finally change that and put Parliament unequivocally in charge.

That is exactly why we announced plans for a great repeal Bill last week; it is a clear commitment to end the primacy of EU law. It will return sovereignty to the institutions of the United Kingdom, because that is what the referendum result was all about: taking control. Naturally, Parliament will oversee the passage of the Bill, which will allow us to ensure that our statute book is fit for purpose on the day we leave the EU. It will then be for Parliament alone to determine what changes to the law best suit the national interest.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): I have long heard the right hon. Gentleman voice his support for parliamentary scrutiny. Will he therefore bring forward a vote in Parliament on the Government's opening position and the terms that they will present for negotiation to the European Union?

Mr Davis: I will come back to some of that later. I will not allow any party to have a veto on the decision to leave the European Union. That is the first key decision.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I find this argument that Parliament somehow wants to thwart the will of the people a complete straw man. As has already been pointed out, seven out of 10 Labour MPs represent constituencies where a majority of people voted to leave. As a democrat, I cannot ignore that and I accept the result. Therefore, why is the right hon. Gentleman running scared of parliamentary scrutiny?

Mr Davis: I am hardly running scared of parliamentary scrutiny. As has already been noted, I have made two statements to the House and appeared twice before Select Committees, and today there is this outing, and all within two and a half weeks of the parliamentary Session.

Let me return to a comment from the hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras. Let us be clear that we agree that leaving the European Union is a
momentous decision. With such a huge turnout—72%, with over 33 million people having their say—there is an overwhelming mandate to put the will of the British people into practice. I have spoken at length about our plan to make a success of Brexit. As I set out in my statement on 5 September—it, too, was quoted by the hon. and learned Gentleman—our plan has four aims.

First, we want to build a national consensus around our position. I have already promised more than once to listen to all sides of the debate and ensure that we fight in our negotiation for the best deal for the country. We cannot do that in an air of secrecy, but I will come back to that later. Secondly, we will put the national interest first and listen carefully to the devolved Administrations. Thirdly, wherever possible—it is not always possible—we should minimise uncertainty. That is what the great repeal Bill is about: bringing existing EU law into domestic law upon exit day, and empowering Parliament to make the changes necessary to reflect our new relationship. Finally, by the end of this process, when we have left the European Union, we will have put the sovereignty and supremacy of this Parliament beyond doubt.

Claire Perry: Fundamentally, the issue is that although we all want scrutiny, the eyes of the world and of the financial markets are upon us. I am extremely concerned about what has happened to sterling and interest rates since the Prime Minister’s comments at the party conference last week. The problem that the Secretary of State is not acknowledging is that many people in this country do not think that there is a policy to put the national interest first; they think that there is a policy to put people’s narrow ideological interests first. He should be setting out clearly how we will protect British jobs and businesses and putting ideology in the past, where it belongs.

Mr Davis: I hardly think it is ideology—

Claire Perry: I do.

Mr Davis: I hardly think it is ideology to reflect the will of the British people.

Nadhim Zahawi: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way a second time. Does he agree with the Italian Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi, when he says that we have to make Brexit work for the EU and for the United Kingdom, because if we do not it will make a mockery of democracy? That is not ideology.

Mr Davis: He is right. Nobody involved in this exercise from the other side of the argument has ever pointed out quite how odd it is that fellow democracies—indeed, allies—threaten to punish each other for the exercise of democratic rights.

I want to take up the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Devizes (Claire Perry), because there is undoubtedly a big task ahead of us and people naturally want to understand where we are headed. We have been pretty clear on the overarching aims—not the detailed aims, because we are not yet at the point at which that is possible. The overarching aims are: bringing back control of our laws to Parliament; bringing back control of decisions over immigration to the UK; maintaining the strong security co-operation we have with the EU; and establishing the freest possible market in goods and services with the EU and the rest of the world. I cannot see how those are not very clear overarching strategic objectives.

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): It would help businesses to have as much clarity as possible on the likely future trading arrangements. I was concerned to hear VTB Bank’s announcement yesterday that it intends to locate its activity outside the UK. The more clarity we can give—without, of course, prejudicing our negotiating position, the better it will be for British businesses, because there is a danger that some may make decisions in the next three or four months.

Mr Davis: I take my hon. Friend’s point. The issue that we must bear in mind, however, is that we can give clarity as we go along in the negotiating strategy—in grand terms but not in detailed terms—but what we cannot do is tell anybody, businesses or others, where we will arrive at the final stage, because it is a negotiation. We have to face the fact that it is a negotiation and, therefore, it is not entirely under the control of one country.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) said on “The Politics Show” at lunchtime that it is likely that the Government will publish a Green Paper or a White Paper with their proposals to form the basis of consultation before triggering article 50. Is that the latest handbrake U-turn? What does the Secretary of State have to say?

Mr Davis: The answer is no. By the way, I think that a half U-turn is a right turn. One of the reasons I gave way to the hon. Gentleman was to say that one of the things that we have sought to clarify early on, and that does not have an associated cost in negotiating terms, is the treatment of employment rights for workers. We made that very clear very early, just as I tried to do with the status of EU migrants here. We can do those things earlier, but we cannot, as he well knows—he has negotiated any number of deals in his time—give away all our negotiating strategy early.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr Davis: Not at the moment. Let me just finish this section of my speech before giving way to one of my colleagues.

We have these fairly obvious, overarching strategic aims. They are very clear; they are not remotely doubtful. It must be that Labour does not want to recognise that because it finds some of those aims uncomfortable. I am not entirely sure what Labour’s policy is on European immigration. It is completely unspecified.

Keir Starmer: Are we going to get more than those four short sentences? Are we going to get a plan? That is a simple question.

Mr Davis: The hon. and learned Gentleman can wait until the later part of my speech, when I will give him the exact answer. He will have to wait for that.
The reason this has not been promised before the end of March is that it takes time, as the hon. and learned Gentleman will understand. We are meeting organisations from across the country, from the creative industries, telecoms, financial services, agriculture and energy, including the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, Universities UK and the TUC. All those organisations are putting their concerns to us. Some of those are incredibly serious concerns, which we have to deal with. We are focusing on dealing with those concerns, establishing what opportunities there are—there are significant opportunities, too—and then devising a negotiating strategy that serves the interests of the whole country: all of them, not one at a time.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): My constituency has the third highest level of financial sector employment in the UK. Does the right hon. Gentleman share my concern that while employees in that sector do not hear the detail of the Government’s position on negotiations, they do hear—as we have just heard from his party’s Back Benchers—from employers who are looking, over time, to move out of this country?

Mr Davis: I am afraid that in the immediate aftermath of the vote to leave there was an extraordinary outpouring almost of grief—a “blame Brexit” festival, if you like. It ranged from the Italian Finance Minister blaming us for the state of his bond markets to, more significantly, banks in this country saying that they were laying people off because of Brexit, which, of course, turned out to be entirely untrue. I would have sympathy with employees made nervous by employers who are guessing the worst outcome.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): I urge the Secretary of State to take a more constructive approach with those who have sincere anxieties about the future. Some 58% of the north-east’s exports go to EU countries. However people voted in the referendum, they did not vote to lose jobs. The terms of Brexit are absolutely essential. Does the Secretary of State not recognise that parliamentary scrutiny is therefore also essential?

Mr Davis: I started by saying that I was in favour of parliamentary scrutiny; I will widen that out later. Part of the reason for that—not the only reason, by any means—is a recognition of people’s concerns about their job futures. There is no doubt about that. That is why we said in terms that we want a free trade arrangement that is at least as good as what we have now, with both the European Union and outside.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): May I tempt the right hon. Gentleman to put some flesh on the bones of the immigration issue? Have the Government arrived at a decision to give EU citizens currently here the rights that they had on 23 June? Have they agreed to break the automaticity between trade and people? Have they agreed that EU citizens should have the same conditions for immigration as non-EU citizens? There must be some very broad principles that he could share with the House now.

Mr Davis: Let me deal with the first issue that the right hon. Lady raised: the treatment of current EU migrants. I have said in terms—I was quoted by the shadow Secretary of State—that we seek to give them guarantees as good as they have now. The only condition is that we get the same guarantees for British citizens. Far from making people bargaining chips, treating them as a group, collectively, avoids making them bargaining chips.

On other aspects of immigration policy, my task is to bring control back to the UK, not to decide what eventual immigration policy will be. It must be decidable here, in this House, by the British Government, subject to parliamentary oversight and control.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Davis: I will make some progress and give way again in a moment.

I return to the Opposition’s motion. They say that there should be “a full and transparent debate on the Government’s plan for leaving the EU”.

I agree. At the same time, I am sure that we can all agree that nothing should be done to compromise the national interest in the negotiation to come; I think the shadow Secretary of State said that in his opening speech.

I could list the 100 questions that we have answered, the oral statements, the appearances before Select Committees; the House knows all that. As a Department, we are not being backward in appearing in front of the House. The House may not be overwhelmed with the detail of the answers yet—that is hardly surprising: we are only a few weeks into the process and six months away from the end of it. The simple truth is that we are appearing regularly in front of the House and seeking to give as much as we can.

Caroline Lucas: The right hon. Gentleman said a moment ago that the great repeal Bill will give us some certainty, so may I ask him for certainty on environmental legislation in particular? Even when EU legislation has been enshrined in UK law, we need to know, first, the extent to which any future changes to environmental safeguards will be subject to parliamentary scrutiny and vote; and, secondly, what kind of accountability mechanisms he imagines will be in place. Once we are out of the EU, we lose access to the European Court of Justice and the Commission. How will that environmental legislation become judiciable?

Mr Davis: The legislation is judiciable and subject to amendment in this House. It will be entirely subject to the will of the House. Any Government seeking to alter it will have to get the permission of the House through a vote in the House. That is very plain. It will also be under the jurisdiction of the British courts; that is the other aspect that the hon. Lady asked about.

Anna Soubry: To follow up on the question asked by the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart), I seek a bone. Will my right hon. Friend please tell us whether the Government have turned their backs on membership of the single market? Yes or no, please.

Mr Davis: I am afraid that that intervention is rather a demonstration of one of the problems that we have with the language on this issue. People have been talking
about “hard Brexit” and “soft Brexit”, which mean very little. Attempts have been made to pigeonhole what could be any one of a whole range of outcomes in market terms. We have not yet started a negotiation with the European Union and there is a whole spectrum—from free trade area, to customs union, to the single market arrangement. The shadow Secretary of State was laying out some of those possibilities. We are not going to go for a Norwegian, Turkish or Swiss option—we are going for a British option, which will be tailored to our interests and better for our interests than any other option.

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman’s non-answer to the reasonable question asked by the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) illustrates the point. The reason he is struggling today can be found in the words of Sir Andrew Cahn, who said in September:

“I find it…shocking…that David Cameron as Prime Minister prohibited the civil service from doing preparatory work…I think it was a humiliation for this country that our partners in Europe should say: ‘You’ve voted for this, but you have no idea what you want’”.

Can the right hon. Gentleman give any plausible explanation for that serious dereliction of duty by the former Prime Minister?

Mr Davis: There are very many things I could do at this Dispatch Box, but criticising David Cameron is not one of them.

Chris Bryant rose—

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Davis: In a moment—[Interruption.] All right, I will give way to my right hon. Friend.

Mrs Gillan: I am most grateful to my right hon. Friend.

May I nail this lie once and for all? The other day, the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee took evidence from Sir Jeremy Heywood, who confirmed that senior civil servants were meeting before the referendum to discuss the outcomes, including the possibility that the country would vote to leave the European Union. Plans and preparations were being made by the British civil service before the referendum.

Mr Davis: I will now move on to the question of scrutiny itself.

The House already has plans to put in place the so-called Brexit Select Committee, which will take effect next month, and we will be appearing in front of it regularly. It would be surprising if we appeared in front of that Committee and did not talk about some of our plans. I expect to attend the Committee regularly, just as I will attend the Lords Committee—its equivalent, effectively. We do not shy away from scrutiny; we welcome it. Members will know that I have continually welcomed and championed the extension of Select Committee powers since the publication of the Wright Committee report in 2009. The public expect Ministers to engage with Parliament in this way, and we will continue to do so.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr Davis: In a moment.

I also made a commitment in September that this Parliament will be at least as informed of progress in our negotiations as the European Parliament. The hon. and learned Gentleman did not appear to believe it when I told the Lords, but it was also made plain to the Foreign Affairs Committee. We are setting up administrative procedures to ensure that, when this becomes relevant in a month or two, these things happen and happen quickly, so that we do not have to go to an EU website to find what we want to know. That will be the minimum, but Members should understand that we will be going considerably beyond that.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Give way?

Mr Davis: In a moment—a very Scot Nat way of getting attention.

I made the commitment that Parliament be kept at least as informed as, and better informed than, the European Parliament. I have also asked the Chief Whip through the usual channels to ensure that we have a series of debates so that the House can air its views. Again, it would be very surprising if we had those debates without presenting to the House something for it to debate.

Neil Gray: I refer back to the question from the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), which I do not think the Secretary of State answered adequately. You are either a member of the single market or you are not. It is clear now that the Government need to spell things out: are they in favour of being members of the single market or are they not? Inform the House.

Mr Davis: It is astonishing how linear, or black and white, some Members think this is. We have Norway, which is inside the single market and outside the customs union; we have Turkey, which is inside the customs union and outside the single market; and we have Switzerland, which is not in the single market but has equivalent access to all of its productive and manufacturing services. There is not a single entity, but a spectrum of outcomes, and we will be seeking to get the best of that spectrum of outcomes.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): The Secretary of State will know that, throughout the country, when this issue was being discussed, the British public knew that membership of the single market meant free movement of labour. That was one of the basic principles behind why people, in their millions, voted to leave. Is it not time that we straightforwardly said that we want the fullest possible access to the single market, but that we cannot, if we are going to stop free movement, which is what the people of this country wanted, be members of the single market?

Mr Davis: Broadly, the argument about full access and control of our borders is an argument that the Prime Minister has already made in the last few weeks,
so I do not think I need to elaborate on it. However, let us understand something about this—sometimes, we seem to be arguing over which end of the egg we open first. The argument between us is where the dividing line is on what we tell Parliament about. The hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras recognised in terms, I think, that we could not give every detail to Parliament and that, despite his letter, we could not give a blow-by-blow account—that we could not have Parliament dictate how we dealt with the trade-offs, the terms and so on.

Parliament dictate how we dealt with the trade-offs, the terms so on. I think, that we could not give every detail to Parliament to have understood something about this—sometimes, we seem to be arguing over which end of the egg we open first. The argument between us is where the dividing line is on what we tell Parliament about. The hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras recognised in terms, I think, that we could not give every detail to Parliament and that, despite his letter, we could not give a blow-by-blow account—that we could not have Parliament dictate how we dealt with the trade-offs, the terms and so on. [Interruption.] Despite the noise to his right, it is fairly plain that that is what the criterion is; that is where the problem is.

Let us be clear how this applies. If someone tells their opposite number in a negotiation exactly what their top priority is, that will make that top priority extremely expensive. Ordinary people, in their ordinary lives, probably do one big transaction themselves, and that is the purchase of a house. If someone went to buy a house, and they looked at only one house, told the owner that they were in love with that house and made a bid for it, I suspect the price would go up.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr Davis: In a moment—I have a lady over here who wants to make an intervention.

Similarly, if someone makes pre-emptive indications that they are willing to make a concession on something, they reduce the value of that concession. Therefore, in many, many ways, we cannot give details about how we will run the negotiation.

Mrs Miller: My right hon. Friend is right that negotiations are a fragile process. I welcome his support for scrutiny. My Select Committee—the Women and Equalities Committee—is looking closely at the impact of Brexit on equality protections, which I am sure is not high on his list at the moment. Will he undertake today to work with us on that and to contribute to our Select Committee inquiry? At the moment, we are finding it difficult to secure that contribution from his Department.

Mr Davis: I see no reason not to help the Select Committee on that basis; that seems an eminently sensible use of time and of the Select Committee’s expertise, so of course we will do that. However, this will be an issue right across the board; pretty much every Select Committee in the House of Commons will have an interest, one way or another, in the progress of Brexit and in what the outcome will be.

Chris Bryant: May I ask the Secretary of State about timing? As I understand it, the Government intend us to have left the European Union by 1 April 2019. The two years allowed for in article 50 will transpire during that period, but he has already laid out loads of different areas that will have to be legislated for as a result of the negotiations. After the negotiations have happened, he might be overturned in this House or at the other end of the building. How will he make sure that he carries the whole country with him on each of the bits and pieces of the detail if he has not produced a draft of what he is aiming for in the first place?

Mr Davis: That is why we made it plain at the beginning of this process that we would have the great repeal Bill, which will put into UK law—or domestic law, more accurately—what is currently the acquis communautaire. That is the start position. Then it comes down to the House to amend that under the guidance of the individual Departments. There may be, for example, a fisheries Bill; there may be some other legislation of that nature. That will have to be argued through at the time. It is pretty straightforward.

Mr McFadden: The Secretary of State said a moment ago that it would be a mistake for the Government to illustrate what its top priority in the negotiations was, but is it not the case that every speech at the Conservative party conference indicated that the top priority was the control and limitation of immigration from within the European Union?

Mr Davis: That, frankly, will be within our own control. If you leave the European Union, that gives you control over that issue. How you deal with the European Union, and trade with it, then comes on from there, so that is not an issue that actually meets that.

The simple demonstration of the point I am making is this: in Northern Ireland, where we have the really important issue of soft borders to resolve, both sides of the decision-making process—the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government—have a similar interest. As a result, we can be very open about that issue, and we have indeed been very open about it; indeed, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland was quoted in The Guardian on Monday in detail about what he is trying to achieve in terms of customs arrangements, cross-border arrangements and the common travel area. All of those things were very straightforwardly laid out in some detail. Why? Because that does not give away any of our negotiating cards, as this is between two people with the same aim. That is a much better example of how we have to be careful about what we say as we go into the negotiations.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): The Secretary of State mentions taking back control of fisheries, so is it an area that might be devolved to the Scottish Parliament after the United Kingdom leaves the European Union? Will he rule out—unlike the Secretary of State for Scotland, who seemed to be unable to do so earlier today—any power being repatriated from the Scottish Parliament to this place as part of the Brexit process?

Mr Davis: I would not expect that as part of the Brexit process. To take the serious point, we need to discuss with all the devolved Administrations how to address sectors—such as fisheries, farming, hill farming—the legal basis of which will alter as we bring things back to the United Kingdom.

Alex Salmond: The position or the status quo, as the Secretary of State well knows, is that everything is devolved to Scotland unless it is reserved. Agriculture and fisheries are not reserved; therefore, they are devolved. Unless the Government intend to change that position, agriculture and fisheries will automatically go to the Scottish Government.
Mr Davis: This is an area on which we have not talked to the devolved Administration yet. We will do so before we get to bringing such things back.

Such an attitude on the details of the negotiations is not taken simply by the Government. The Lords European Union Committee concluded:

“It is clear...that parliamentary scrutiny of the negotiations will have to strike a balance between, on the one hand, the desire for transparency, and on the other, the need to avoid undermining the UK’s negotiating position.”

This is hardly rocket science. It should hardly be controversial; it should be straightforward. At every stage of this process, I want this House to be engaged and updated. As I have made clear, we will observe the constitutional and legal conventions that apply to any new treaty on a new relationship with the European Union.

Ian C. Lucas: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Davis: I will give way in a moment.

I want to address the final part of the motion about this House being able properly to scrutinise Government plans for leaving the EU before article 50 is invoked. Article 50 sets out the process by which we leave the EU, which has been decided by the British people. Invoking it is a job for the Government. Leaving the EU is what the British people voted for on 23 June, and article 50 is how we do it.

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I welcome the terms of the Government amendment, which seems entirely sensible. Does my right hon. Friend agree, and is my understanding right, that he now accepts that those of us raising concerns about the level of debate necessary ahead of the triggering of article 50 are by no means seeking to frustrate the will of the people—we recognise the instruction from the British people that we should leave the European Union—but seeking a full understanding of the Government’s broad negotiating aims?

Mr Davis: I am glad to hear my right hon. Friend say that. In truth, scrutiny of our strategic aims is what debates such as this are about, as is parliamentary engagement of the kind I have mentioned—debating the issues that will inform our negotiating position, and holding the Government to account. However, such scrutiny has to be at the strategic level; it cannot be at the tactical level or enter into the detailed negotiation.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Is this not one of those strange debates in which both sides actually agree with each other—in this case, that we will have parliamentary scrutiny? If the Opposition are against such an approach, they can have Opposition days, hold Back-Bench business debates, table urgent questions, ask questions during statements and have Westminster Hall debates. All those are in the power of Parliament. We are absolutely not disagreeing; in the end, we will all agree with the amended motion. There is a lot of general noise, but Parliament is actually agreeing that the process should go forward, and we will scrutinise it properly. Does the Secretary of State agree that that is the gist of it?

Mr Davis: To be frank, I do. We have been going round in circles, debating whether we are going to have a debate.

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman mentioned hill farming, the agricultural sector and the fisheries sector. I happen to be a crofter, and many crofters will be wondering whether there will still be financial support for hill sheep farmers and the rest post-Brexit. Indeed, fishermen will be asking the same about the assistance for purchasing and upgrading fishing boats. On those two things, can we be sure that the money coming from Europe will be replaced by the UK Government?

Mr Davis: I think the hon. Gentleman will know that we have already made undertakings in relation to the 2020 round, which is of course the end of the European guarantee. Beyond that, I am quite sure the Treasury will be looking very hard at the necessary economics of such industries in all the devolved Administrations and, indeed, in England.

Ian C. Lucas: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr Davis: No, I will not give way.

Let me be clear: the Opposition spokesman said that the British people did not vote for any particular model of Brexit—I think that is pretty much what he said—but they voted to “leave the European Union”, which were the words on the ballot paper. It is reasonable to think that they did not make an assumption about soft Brexit or hard Brexit, or any other specification of Brexit; they assumed that the British Government would set about negotiating to get the best possible result for all parts of society, all parts of the United Kingdom—including all the devolved Administrations—and all industries, sectors, services, manufacturers and so on. If the hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) says, “Yeah, yeah”. We know her view of the British working class. She has really had a very good time on that, has she not? I take a much more serious view of the fate of the British working class under a Government that she would support.

Ms Eagle: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Mr Davis: No.

The simple truth is that the British Government are setting out to achieve the best possible outcome on security, on control of our borders and in democratic terms, as well as for access to markets across the whole world: the European Union and all the opportunities outside it. The British people voted for that—17.5 million of them.

2.16 pm

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I welcome the new Opposition spokesperson, the hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), to his role. We very much look forward to working with him during these crucial few months. I thank him for bringing this motion to the House. The Secretary of
State has shown that he still has a long way to go to meet the doubts and questions that the hon. and learned Gentleman raised, but securing such a debate is a step in the right direction.

The talks and negotiations during this crucial period will have an impact across every policy area in every part of the country, but we are seeing very little in the way of detail. I fear that this lack of detail has more to do with a Cabinet who cannot agree among themselves than with any ideas about the negotiating strategy. I am a new Member of Parliament, but other hon. Members may be able to tell me whether it is normal for a Secretary of State—we welcome him—to spend so much time at the Dispatch Box without actually telling us anything. He spent a lot of time at the Dispatch Box, and I am none the wiser about where we are at the moment, which seems remarkable.

I wonder whether the Government can tell us something else about the negotiations. They tell us they will have the negotiations, but when my hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) brought up the issue of the single market—other hon. Members have asked other key questions—they have shown that they cannot answer a simple question. That is striking. When they sit down with our European partners and start the negotiations, what will they say? What can they possibly tell our European partners? We do not even have a starting point.

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Gethins: I just want to make this point. The Secretary of State told my hon. Friend that this is like buying a house. It is not; it is a democratic process that will have a significant impact on our citizens, and it should be subject to the most intense scrutiny of this place and of the devolved Administrations.

Sammy Wilson: I know that the hon. Gentleman and his party are resisting the will of the people as expressed across the United Kingdom in this referendum, but what does he find difficult about the Secretary of State’s assurance that when it comes to trade—just to take the single market issue—the Government are seeking to ensure maximum exposure to the European market for British manufacturers and service industries, which is the aim of the negotiations? What is so difficult about that?

Stephen Gethins: Many of the hon. Gentleman’s own constituents—57% of the people of Northern Ireland, in fact—voted to remain part of the EU, for many reasons, one of which was an act of irresponsibility committed by the Secretary of State and others, who campaigned to leave the European Union based on a blank sheet of paper. I have said in this House before, and will say again, that when we campaigned for independence, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) had the decency to produce a 670-page White Paper. People knew what they were voting for, and it was not the kind of mess that we are seeing today.

Mr MacNeil: I am sure that the farmers and fishermen of Northern Ireland will be as worried and concerned as the crofters and fishermen of the Outer Hebrides that there are no guarantees for their funding post 2020. That is a real case of material concern for people in all parts of the UK.

Stephen Gethins: My hon. Friend raises a very good point. Funding is a significant concern for fishermen, farmers, universities and others who rely on our relationship with the European Union. We are dealing with an act of negligence from the Government, who are providing us with no detail; that builds on an act of gross irresponsibility by the Vote Leave campaign.

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Gethins: If you can answer for that act of gross irresponsibility, I will give way.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I am very grateful. The hon. Gentleman has mentioned that his party produced a 600-page dossier ahead of the Scottish vote, but when asked which currency would be used under independence, it simply had no idea, nor any clue about the consequences of independence.

Stephen Gethins: That is remarkable. My right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon set up a fiscal commission working group to look into that, covering a whole range of arguments. I am sure we can make that available to the hon. Gentleman. We had all the details. There were two Nobel laureates on that group. How many Nobel laureates do the Government have? Zero. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr MacNeil, you are an exceptionally boisterous fellow, and in the course of your boisterous behaviour appear to be chewing some sort of gum. It is very eccentric conduct. I have great aspirations for you to be a statesman, but your apprenticeship still has some distance to travel.

Stephen Gethins: If the House will forgive me mixing my cultural references, the three Brexiteers and their friends have got us into another fine mess, and cannot tell us how they are going to get us out of it.

Jonathan Edwards: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Gethins: I will come to the hon. Gentleman in a moment.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon raised a very significant point about the devolved Administrations that, like most points put to the Secretary of State, was not answered. Fishing and farming are not a matter of negotiation in these islands, so will responsibility for fishing and farming go straight to the Scottish Parliament after Brexit? Or is there going to be a change to schedule 5 to the Scotland Act 1998? There is no answer. But that is not a matter of negotiation. It is a matter of fact—and it is facts that the Secretary of State cannot give us.

The situation is extraordinarily disappointing for the devolved Administrations, who have gone from being involved to being consulted. Will the Secretary of State...
tell us, as the Prime Minister told us previously, whether there will be an agreed position with the devolved Administrations? Perhaps someone will take a note of that for him. What will be the formal role of the Scottish Parliament?

This place and the UK Government do not have a particularly good track record when standing up for fishermen, farmers and others. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) has raised the point, as has my right hon. Friend, that when we went into the European Union Scotland’s fishermen, and fishermen across these islands, were described as expendable.

Alex Salmond: This intervention will give the Secretary of State the opportunity to consider my hon. Friend’s question. In the days after she took office, the Prime Minister met Scotland’s First Minister and seemed to assure Scotland that article 50 would not be triggered until there was an agreed position with the Scottish Administration. It is very fair for my hon. Friend to ask whether that is still Government policy or whether the Prime Minister has been countermanded by the Secretary of State for Brexit.

Stephen Gethins: My right hon. Friend makes a very good point.

Mr David Davis: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Gethins: I will—perhaps the right hon. Gentleman will give us an answer.

Mr David Davis: I apologise for having to intervene to give this answer. The Prime Minister showed very clearly how important she considered the devolved Administration in Scotland. She went to Scotland first after coming to power, and said, plainly, two things. One was that we will consult and have detailed discussions with the Scottish Administration, and those in Wales and Northern Ireland, before we trigger article 50 and bring the great repeal Bill to the House. But we cannot give anyone a veto. We consider ourselves bound by the decision of the British people. No one can say, “No, you can’t do this”, but we will do everything possible in our power to meet the needs of the Scottish people and the other devolved Administrations.

Stephen Gethins: Yet more time at the Dispatch Box for the Secretary of State, but with even less information. We were told that there would be an agreed position with the devolved Administrations. He seems to be backtracking on that. Perhaps in due course he will tell us whether there will still be that agreed position. However, I do not want to get him into trouble yet again, so will leave him to chat to the Prime Minister about that.

Mr Jenkin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Gethins: I will make some progress. There is a valuable point that this place has to learn. Democracy in the United Kingdom does not begin and end in this Parliament, and has not done so for some time. Yet at the moment, we are in a situation where the unelected House of Lords along the corridor will have a greater say on what happens next than the elected devolved Administrations.

I will set out some questions that I know those in the devolved Administrations will be asking themselves. What happens to the coastal communities fund, upon which fishing communities depend? What happens to the CAP—an issue raised not least by my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr MacNeil)? What happens to the renewables obligations, where Scotland is streaking ahead of the rest of the United Kingdom, along with our climate change obligations? What happens to our world-leading universities—I have to mention the University of St Andrews and its outstanding work in this field?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Never heard of it!

Stephen Gethins: My hon. Friend is clearly in need of a better education.

What happens to the environment and our air pollution targets? What happens to the social protections? All those questions are unanswered—and we still do not have an answer on what will happen on the single market or to European nationals.

Mr Jenkin: I chair the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. The hon. Gentleman is raising very legitimate points on the very legitimate basis that democracy exists in other parts of the United Kingdom somewhat independently of this House. We therefore need a respectful and constructive dialogue between the United Kingdom Government and the Administrations in the other parts of the UK, as well as between this Parliament and the other Parliaments of the United Kingdom. I have already visited the Scottish Parliament with my Committee to that end, and am offering to give evidence to the Scottish Parliament on those questions and how we should address them. I hope that the dialogue he wants will be in that spirit of co-operation.

Stephen Gethins: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising those points and for visiting Edinburgh. I encourage him and his colleagues on the Committee to interact with their colleagues on the Committees of the Scottish Parliament. I am glad to be able to say this time that I think he has made a very fair point. I agree that that is what should happen.

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Gethins: I want to make some progress.

Key questions need to be answered, for example, on the single market. I want to talk about European nationals for a moment. European nationals have made this country richer by being part of it. For the International Trade Secretary to describe them as “cards” was utterly unacceptable, although I note the Brexit Secretary is rowing back from that.

Mr Jones rose—
Stephen Gethins: On that point, I give way to the hon. Gentleman, who has been trying to intervene.

Mr Jones: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Government cannot even be straight on the structural funds, which he mentioned? The Chancellor’s letter earlier this year refers only to funds allocated already, but not to the huge amounts of funding for the north-east, for example, that is yet to be allocated. Even on that there is confusion. If it is not the full amount, the north-east, like other regions, could lose hundreds of millions of pounds.

Stephen Gethins: The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point, and that situation affects universities, businesses and so many others, including cultural organisations such as St Athernase church in Leuchars in my constituency, which is 850 years old, and which was looking for European funding to help keep that jewel standing. It must now think about where it goes next, without any answers. We need to plan well beyond 2020, so he makes an excellent point.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Gethins: Not at the moment.

That point reminds me that the Institute for Government has said:

“There is a gaping void in the Government negotiating strategy.”

There is also a gaping void in their policy. They are responsible for negotiating on behalf of all of us, which should concern us. We have not seen any more details. We have not seen a Green Paper, although I am not sure whether Ministers have.

We should think about the impact. The Fraser of Allander Institute says that in Scotland alone—I know hon. Members from elsewhere in the United Kingdom have concerns—there will be 3% fewer jobs by the time we leave the European Union, which could mean 80,000 jobs. Real wages could be 7% lower, which will affect households. The Treasury—these are the Government’s own figures—warns that the cost of leaving the European Union could be £66 billion.

Joanna Cherry: My hon. Friend will be aware that the financial services sector in Scotland supports 150,000 jobs, many of which are in my Edinburgh South West constituency. He will also be aware that there is concern in the sector about whether passporting rights will be lost or kept as a result of Brexit. Does he agree that, if the Government are not successful in negotiating passporting rights for the financial sector, many jobs are likely to leave Scotland and go to the European continent?

Stephen Gethins: My hon. and learned Friend rightly makes an excellent point on the effect on her constituency. Professor Graeme Roy from the Fraser of Allander Institute has said that leaving the EU would have a “significant negative impact on the Scottish economy”, which rings true with my hon. and learned Friend’s point.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman mentioned a moment ago that people wanted certainty beyond 2020. Is he aware that the multi-annual financial framework will not be renewed until 2020, and therefore that there is uncertainty even if we remain within the European Union as to how funding will continue after that date, including for the crofters of the hon. Member for Na-h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr MacNeil)?

Stephen Gethins: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on referring to my hon. Friend the Member for Na-h-Eileanan an Iar correctly. The hon. Gentleman is right about 2020, but universities, businesses, regions and local authorities will negotiate and collaborate with one another well beyond that. They are currently not certain of membership of the European Union, the single market and the continued benefits of those programmes. I therefore do not agree with him on that point. That is a significant amount of uncertainty.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Gethins: I will not give way yet.

Over the coming little while, much of the debate should be about scrutiny—we should be able to talk about our constituents who are affected—but it should also be about vision and the kind of country we want to see if the rest of the United Kingdom leaves. I was proud, as I am sure every member of my party was, that 62% of people in Scotland voted to remain.

Toby Perkins rose—

Ms Gisela Stuart rose—

Stephen Gethins: I will not give way at the moment.

That 62% represented the biggest gap between leave and remain in any part of the United Kingdom. For me, that speaks of a positive vision. That is the vision of a country that wants to take its place in the world. I joined the Scottish National party because I believe in a Scotland that is equal in this family of nations throughout the European Union. I believe in a Scotland that should co-operate on an equal basis with our partners in the Netherlands, Norway, Germany, France, England and Wales—and indeed Northern Ireland, which is among our closest friends and partners. I believe that the EU nationals who have made Scotland their home are welcome and should stay and make a contribution.

I am proud to be part of a group that draws members from across the United Kingdom and beyond. We want a country that is outward looking and co-operating with our European partners. That is why so many people in Scotland and elsewhere are turning away from the United Kingdom and a Conservative Government who are being led by the nose by UKIP, talking about EU nationals as “cards”, and talking about firms drawing up and putting out lists of foreigners. I do not subscribe to that, and nor does any SNP Member.

We want more scrutiny, but I fear that it will be insufficient. I want to hear the Minister answer my questions and the valid points made by the hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras.

Several hon. Members rose—
Mr Speaker: Order. We will begin with a 10-minute limit on Back-Bench speeches, from which a number of hon. and right hon. Members will benefit, but I give due notice to the House that that limit will have to be sharply lowered, probably relatively early.

2.36 pm

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): Sadly I was not able to attend the Conservative party conference this year, but I followed its proceedings very closely, or as closely as I could, through reports in the media. I was rather surprised to find that some very clear statements of policy on the subject of Europe were made from the platform that I was not totally expecting. One was that we would not trigger article 50 before the end of March at the latest. I rather approve of that. This is such a portentous decision that a long and careful preparation of a policy within the Government, whom I fear probably do not yet have an agreed policy, is important. When I say that they should take as long as possible about it, I do not mean to be sarcastic. I do not underestimate the sheer scale of the task facing them to agree the strategy.

Other announcements were made, however. It was made absolutely clear that freedom of movement of labour with other European countries will be over. That conjured up the vision of work permits and so on, and possibly quotas. It was made perfectly clear that the control of all the rules and regulations that currently enable free trade within the single market will be taken back into our jurisdiction. No Brexiteer at the moment is able to name any very important rule that they wish to change, but we are taking it back into the British Parliament, and will then be free to change such rules of the market as Parliament agrees it wants to change.

We will also no longer submit to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. The way in which the European Union has worked, and the reason it has lasted and still lasts as a 28 nation state organisation with common rules, is that there are institutions for enforcing those rules. Indeed, Britain used the European Court of Justice extremely successfully to preserve the passport for financial services when attempts were made to take it away by some of the new eurozone members.

John Redwood rose—

Mr Clarke: I will give way only once because we will be very short of time in the debate. Not for the first time, I give way to my right hon. Friend.

John Redwood: I assure my right hon. and learned Friend that there are a number of things we want to change pretty quickly. The common fisheries policy needs to be changed in the interests of Britain, and we would like to impose our own VAT on the products we think appropriate.

Mr Clarke: If anybody has an alternative fisheries policy that they have worked out, I look forward to a full debate on the subject, but I will not go into that area at the moment.

The point I am making is that those three decisions were all interpreted as making it clear that it was the Government’s intention to leave the single market and leave the customs union. Those three decisions, on the face of it, are totally incompatible with the principles defended by successive British Governments, alongside other nation states, ever since the Thatcher Government took the lead in creating the single market. We have always been extremely helpful in our demands that other member states should follow the principles that we were repudiating at the party conference.

I have right hon. and hon. Friends in this House who agree strongly with all three of those propositions, but what surprised me was that those propositions were announced as Government policy without a word of debate in this House of Commons, and, I think I know, without a word of collective discussion in any Cabinet or any Cabinet Committee. They were just pronounced from the platform. That was not a very good start, in my opinion, on this difficult subject. We all saw the consequences of the perfectly sensible reaction outside: that this meant the starting point of the negotiations was leaving the single market and the customs union. I take them to mean that. The three statements are incompatible with everything that has been there before. If I was a French, German, Polish, Spanish or Italian politician, I would look at that list and declare to my Parliament, “Well, that makes it perfectly clear that the British are going out of the single market and the customs union, and we are going to have to determine on what basis we can go back to some lesser access.”

The reaction in the markets was only too obvious. It has continued ever since with continued pronouncements of uncertainty that are holding things back very badly. The pound has devalued to an extent that would have caused a political crisis 30 years ago when I first came here, and not for the first time.

Kwasi Kwarteng: The ERM.

Mr Clarke: Well, that was regarded as a political crisis. I am sure my hon. Friend did not welcome the ERM and say what a triumph it was to see sterling collapse as it did.

The present position is uncertainty. Although we have to go to March, we need to clarify some things. The uncertainty is not helping. Nobody is going to invest in this country in any international project until there is some clarity about our relationship with the outside world. To anybody who just thinks devaluation is a good thing and Black Wednesday was White Wednesday, I could not disagree more. The situation is that we have now devalued by 40% since 2006 and we have the biggest current account deficit in this country’s history. So the stimulating effect on exports has had its limitations so far. I think we should ask ourselves the question: what is raised by all this?

It is said that it does not matter: we have had the referendum, the public have spoken and all these things were determined. Indeed the Secretary of State, who shifted quite a bit from where I thought he was going to be a couple of days ago when I first saw the Government’s motion, still starts by saying, “The people have spoken” and that all these things have been decided. Well, I do not accept that. Those issues were not addressed during the referendum. In the national media, the debate on both sides was pathetic. The questions about how many millions of Turks were going to come here and how far income tax was going to go up and health service spending be cut, depending on which way you went, achieved rather more prominence than the details of the customs union, and the single market and its effect on any part of our economy.
No two Brexiteers agree, even today on these Benches. There are firm Brexiteers who think that we obviously need the single market, and there are firm Brexiteers who think, “Oh no, we don’t have to do that. It is so important to German car manufacturers and wine exporters that we can stay in the single market.” Actually, that more reflects the debates I have had with Euroseptics over the years. The one thing I have never previously disagreed about with any of my Euroseptic friends in the Conservative party is free trade. They absolutely enthuse with their belief in open markets, free trade and the removal of barriers. Indeed, the other new Secretary of State, who will be responsible for trade relations with the rest of the world, made a speech about the benefits of free trade and globalisation, which made me sound like a protectionist only a few moments ago.

I do not think there is a mandate for saying we are pulling out of the completely open access we have at the moment to a market of 500 million sophisticated, wealthy consumers, and that we feel perfectly free now to go on a voyage of discovery to see how much of that we can retain. My constituency voted in favour of remaining, but anybody who tells me there was a mandate in favour of that, among the leave camp and the 17 million people who voted to leave, is, I think, going to be greeted with a certain amount of disbelief. I therefore think it is a pity that the Secretary of State was obviously still quite unable to say whether the objective of the Government is to stay in the single market and the customs union or not. He gave great assertions. I am delighted to hear that they will be seeking to negotiate to maximise the best interests of the UK and the British people—that is very reassuring—and he hopes to get the best terms he can possibly get on access. Every other member state, however, will make it quite clear to its Parliament and its people what attitudes it is taking during these negotiations towards the single market. We are not.

We are making progress—I will conclude on this point and keep to my limit—and the Government amendment is a step forward that I did not expect to see. I welcome that. I would have voted for the Labour party’s motion. We still have no offer of a vote and we need clarity on the policy the Government are going to pursue, because the Government are accountable to this House for the policy it pursues in negotiations.

2.47 pm

Edward Miliband (Doncaster North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke). I will try to pick up where he left off because of the time limit. I congratulate my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) on, if I can put it this way, a first-rate speech from the Labour Front Bench. I also welcome the progress that has been made, as the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe said, in the past 48 hours. In my view, however, we still have a significant way to go. I believe that nothing less than a vote on the Government’s negotiating strategy before the commencement of the negotiations will do. I want to explain why to the House.

The hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) intervened earlier and said that this is a fuss about nothing, or that some people might say it is a fuss about procedure. This is not about procedure; this is about the country and whether Brexit works for the country or not. I want to address those on the Government Benches in particular, because they, along with those on my side, will have a decisive role in determining whether we get the scrutiny and the vote.

I want to start where we should begin, which is with the state of the country. Let us be honest about this: the state of the country is deeply divided. We were divided by the referendum and we still are divided. Many leavers were delighted by the result but are anxious about what is going to come next. Many remainers are desolate about the outcome and fearful of the demons that have been unleashed. Both sides have reasons for their feelings. Let us be honest: this is not a good state of affairs for the country.

The Secretary of State and the Government say they want to create a national consensus. I agree that we need to create a national consensus. It is up to all of us to try to heal the divisions and create a consensus of the 52% and the 48%. Let us be honest, that will be difficult, but it is what we should try to do. From my side, remain, and for my part, I believe it means we should accept the result of the referendum as part of trying to bridge that divide. People voted and we should accept the result. But, if I can put it this way, the humility of those who lost should be matched by the magnanimity of those who won. So as I think about my responsibilities, I absolutely do think, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) said, about my constituents who voted to leave the European Union. I say to the people who voted for leave and were successful that they should think about the remain people in our country—I am sure they do—who feel lost and wonder whether there is a place for them in Britain after Brexit.

Responsibilities lie on both sides and, if I may say so in passing, we should stop impugning each other’s motives. The vast majority of people who voted to leave did not do so because of prejudice. And, if I can put it the other way, those who are now advocating proper scrutiny and consent from this Parliament are not doing so, as the Daily Mail says today, because we want to reverse the vote. It is for much deeper reasons than that: it is about the mandate from the referendum. We need to put the labels of remain and leave behind us, but that is the beginning, because if the Government are serious about creating a national consensus, then how do we that? We have to take the country with us on this new journey. This cannot be the political equivalent of the country being put to sleep for two years with an anaesthetic and waking up in a magical new land. That has never been the way our democracy worked and it will certainly not work on an issue as big as this.

We need a Government willing to be transparent and consultative with the people and, indeed, this House. The Secretary of State is not here now, but I think even he believes that, because it is significant that three days before his appointment he was saying that we should have a pre-negotiation White Paper. He even implied in that article, which bears reading, that that would strengthen the Government’s negotiating hand. I think it actually would, particularly if there was consent from this House for the Government’s position. Would it not also be an irony if the main act of those who argued in the referendum for the sovereignty of Parliament—”I do not doubt their motives and beliefs”—was to deny the sovereignty of Parliament in determining the outcome of the Brexit negotiations?
I want to deal with the four arguments that have been adduced for why Parliament should not get a vote over this referendum, because I do not think any of them stands up to scrutiny. The first argument is, “Well, we’ve had a referendum.” Correct: we have had a referendum, but as my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras said so eloquently, the referendum determined that we are leaving the European Union. To those who say that the form of Brexit we would have was absolutely clear, I point this out. The Secretary of State himself advocated in 2012 that we should remain a member of the customs union. If it was so clear that we were leaving the customs union and the single market, why was he advocating the opposite position just four years before the referendum took place?

The second argument is an Executive power argument. Of course, the Secretary of State cannot make that argument with a straight face, because he published a Bill—it is an extraordinary Bill, as my hon. and learned Friend said, and should be distributed to all Members of the House—all about the need to control the Executive and the fact that, unless it was set out in statute that the Executive had this power, the consent of this House would be necessary. On something as big as this, with these huge questions about our membership of the single market and our place in the world, surely the consent of the House is necessary.

The third argument is the secrecy argument. I think this is, as the Foreign Secretary might say, baloney as well, because the reality is that, as sure as anything, these negotiations will leak and we will end up in the position where the only people not knowing what our starting position is will be us. We will find out by reading it in the newspapers. If there was ever any abuse of the House of Commons and its place, that would be it.

John Redwood: Does the right hon. Gentleman think that we should be prepared to negotiate away some part of our control over our borders and our money?

Edward Miliband: That is a very simplistic question, but on the substance of it, my position would be that we should do everything we can to stay members of the single market, but that we should also seek adjustments to freedom of movement. The Government’s position is the opposite. As far as I can see, it is that the only thing that matters is immigration and never mind if our economy goes off a cliff. I do not think that is a very good position.

The fourth argument is the red herring of the great repeal Bill. I think the great repeal Bill should be renamed the great entrenchment Bill.

Edward Miliband: Why do I say that? It is because the plan, as the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) knows—he is nodding from a sedentary position—is actually for the great repeal Bill to entrench European law into British domestic law. All these laws that the leave campaign have honourably objected to for so many years will actually be put into British law. The notion that that is a proper means for this Parliament to take a view on the eventual outcome of the negotiation is also baloney, if I am allowed to say that in this House.

The four reasons that I have heard offered for why this House should not provide consent do not stack up. There is another reason, which could be the case—I really hope it is not—which is that the Government do not like the answer they will get if they ask this House for its consent. In other words, they do not believe there is a majority for hard Brexit in the House of Commons, so the thing they are desperate to avoid at all costs is getting the consent of this House, because they think they will end up in a negotiation in which they do not like the thing they are negotiating for. Well, I am afraid that is tough, because they need the consent and the confidence of this House on an issue as big as this, when there is no mandate from the referendum, certainly no mandate from the manifesto—which, let us remember, said yes to the single market—and no mandate for a Prime Minister who, let us not forget, was a remainder. I know she was a relatively silent remainder, but she advocated remain. She did not advocate leave and suddenly get swept to power, surfing on a wave of euphoria because she was in the leave campaign. She was in the remain campaign.

Ian C. Lucas: Does my right hon. Friend think there might be another explanation for the Government’s reluctance to put the matter to the House, which is that they cannot agree themselves what their opening position is?

Edward Miliband: That might well be the case. We only need to read the newspapers to see that if debates are not taking place clearly about the Government’s position in this House, they are certainly taking place clearly in the Cabinet, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer seems to be in a slightly different position from some of his colleagues.

I want to conclude—because there are other people who want to speak in this debate—by returning to where I started. This issue goes so far beyond party politics and so far beyond whether we were for remain or leave in the referendum. It also goes so far beyond our tenure in this House, because the decisions we make in the next two or three years will have implications for decades to come, so I implore Members in all parts of the House, particularly those on the Government Benches. I know there will be pressure not to speak out—some of them have honourably done so—but I hope we will hold to the best traditions of this House as we think about our duties, because our duties are not about procedure.

Mr Grieve: I can give the right hon. Gentleman an absolute, categorical assurance that, as far as I am concerned, my duty to my constituents transcends duty to party in this matter. I agree with him totally that as the effect of this change is so major, we each have to look at how we achieve the best result for our country.

Sammy Wilson rose—

Edward Miliband: I am going to conclude, because I want others to be able to speak.

That is the point I will end on. This is about getting the right outcome for the country. This is about creating the national consensus that the Government say they want. I am certainly going to play my part in doing that and I urge other hon. and right hon. Members to do that too.
2.58 pm

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I must say, in response to the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), that there are of course those who do not and never will accept the outcome of the referendum and who will use almost any means at their disposal to try to overturn it or mitigate the result, while constantly and disingenuously stating their respect for it. That is abundantly clear.

This historic vote was an emphatic vote to leave the European Union. That was what was on the ballot paper. It was clear, and it follows from the fact that we are going to leave the European Union that Brexit does not just mean Brexit; it means the repeal of the European Communities Act 1972, which incorporates and absorbs all the laws and all the judgments of the European Court and all the matters that have come into this House and been imposed upon us by the 1972 Act.

There has been some talk about the Conservative manifesto. I have it here, and I mention it because it is relevant not only to some remarks off by some of my colleagues but to the future conduct of this matter in relation to the House of Lords. Our manifesto states:

"For too long, your voice has been ignored on Europe."

That was stated in 2015 and put to the British people. It further stated that the Conservative party would 

"give you a say over whether we should stay in or leave the EU, with an in-out referendum by the end of 2017."

It then qualifies that—the precise date of the referendum was not known in 2015—by making some perfectly reasonable comments. It commits in the meantime or in parenthesis, as it were—it does not say that, but that is what it implies—to 

"keeping the pound and staying out of the Eurozone", 

which is fair enough, and to 

"reform the workings of the EU".

So long as we are in the EU, we obviously want to reform those workings, because it is 

"too big, too bossy and too bureaucratic".

It goes on to state that the party will 

"reclaim power from Brussels on your behalf and safeguard British interests in the Single Market”—

and I should hope that we would during that interim period, and 

"back businesses to create jobs in Britain by completing ambitious trade deals and reducing red tape."

That is what the manifesto said, and it provided the basis on which not only the general election but the referendum took place. The words in the question were quite clear:

"Do you want to 'remain' in or 'leave' the European Union?"

Mr Kevan Jones: I do not disagree with that, but the hon. Gentleman has skirted over the fact that the manifesto on which he stood gave a commitment to remain in the single market. Where is that now?

Sir William Cash: It is clear from the wording I read out that safeguarding British interests in the single market applies to the intervening period between the result of the general election, the introduction of the EU Referendum Bill and the referendum itself. Indeed, we are going to have to continue to do that until we get to the later stage.

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): I must disagree with my hon. Friend. I have the manifesto with me, too, because I shall refer to it in my remarks. It very clearly states:

"We say: yes to the Single Market”—

and there is no mention in the wording that my hon. Friend cited of there being an interim period in which Britain remains in the single market.

Sir William Cash: My right hon. Friend has, I think, a slight problem here. I understand from remarks made by Members on both sides of the House that when we repeal the 1972 Act, as we intend to do, some will not want to resist it—I see my right hon. Friend nodding her head, for which I am grateful. It is simply not possible for us to be in the single market on the one hand and on the other hand repeal the laws that are implicit in the 1972 Act. We cannot be in the single market and repeal the jurisdiction of that Act.

Nicky Morgan rose—

Mr Grieve rose—

Sir William Cash: I am not giving way for the moment. I am saying that we cannot both be in the single market and repeal the 1972 Act, whose laws are part of the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. I will give way now to the former Attorney-General.

Mr Grieve: My hon. Friend will doubtless agree with me that over the next three to four years we will get out of one treaty and replace it with at least another, if not a multiplicity of treaties—part of the 13,000 by which we are bound internationally at present. He might also agree that Norway provides an example of a country that participates in the single market without being a member of the European Union. Does that not completely destroy the argument that my hon. Friend has just put forward?

Sir William Cash: It does not, because I said implicitly that we would not be able to go into the European economic area for that very reason. The British people have spoken in the referendum, and everyone in the Chamber says that they respect the views of the British people, yet at the same time we hear these weasel words that somehow imply that it is possible to leave the European Union, repeal the European Communities Act 1972 and still remain within the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. That is just nonsense—political and legal nonsense.

Nicky Morgan rose—

Mr Grieve rose—

Sir William Cash: I have given way enough for now, and I want to continue with what I have to say. I shall come back to this issue on another occasion, but my position is abundantly clear and correct: we cannot both be in the single market and repeal the 1972 Act.

What is the meaning of the answer to the question? It meant that, by the consent of the voters given by the sovereignty of this House, this Parliament agreed to give to the British people the right to transfer from Members of Parliament in their place today and beforehand to them the decision on whether we remained or left. That decision was taken by a majority of something of
the order of 6:1. In my judgment, it is unseemly if not absurd for the same Members of Parliament to say, “Oh, well, we did not like the outcome of the result” and then to say “We are now going to mitigate or try to overturn it”.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir William Cash: No, I am not giving way at this stage.

We are debating whether under the terms of this motion we will get a decision or a vote on the issue of trade negotiations before the triggering of article 50, so let me make this point, which is at the heart or at the least surface of the debate, about the Labour party and the Labour Government. No decision was taken by the then Labour Government to have a similar kind of condition imposed on the negotiating deal back in 1975, or indeed in October 1971. Neither in 1975 nor 1971 was there any attempt to prejudge the outcome of the negotiations, which I think speaks for itself.

Jack Dromey: The hon. Gentleman has accused Labour Members of being disingenuous and unseemly if we express concerns about the consequences of leaving the European Union. I represent the Erdington constituency, which is rich in talent but one of the poorest in the country. It is home to the Jaguar factory, which has doubled in size over the last five years and has transformed the lives of thousands of local people. It is absolutely correct for us to express our concern and that of the company that unless we remain in the single market, Jaguar Land Rover, which produces 1.6 million cars a year, 57% of which are exported to the European Union, and its workers will face very serious consequences.

Sir William Cash: I am so glad to hear the hon. Gentleman standing up for his constituents so well, which I always admire and try to do myself. In my constituency, about 65% wanted to leave the EU; the hon. Gentleman referred to Birmingham, where the vote was also to leave. I hope that he will have due regard to what his constituents have said, because they were in favour of coming out.

Let me deal with the assertion that there could somehow or other be a diminution in parliamentary accountability and parliamentary scrutiny. Of course there will be questions, debates, and Select Committees. We all know that a motion for a new Brexit Select Committee is before the House and that a new Chairman will be elected to it. On the idea that this Parliament will not scrutinise or hold the Government to account on all these matters, I do not have the slightest objection, and nor should anyone else, to the questions being put today or indeed on any other day. This is what Parliament is all about.

Some parts of Parliament do not like the outcome of the referendum, but the question itself and the vote to leave were emphatic. In my judgment, that should not be gainsaid by attempting to reverse the result. We all know who the usual suspects are, and I am not looking at one in particular. All I am saying is that there are people—loads of them on the Labour side—who cannot bring themselves to accept the result. [Interruption.] In that case, when the Labour Front-Bench team winds up the debate, I expect to hear a categorical and unequivocal assurance that under no circumstances will any Opposition Member vote against Second Reading or try to undermine the repeal Bill. It sounds to me as though the bottom line is that they will not give that assurance, but I shall be interested if they do.

This historic vote gave the people of this country the opportunity to make a massive decision, one of the biggest decisions taken for generations. We have a democratic sovereign Parliament, which decided to give the vote to the British people. The position is much simpler than it sounds. This was not about the shenanigans over whether Vote Leave misrepresented people, or whether Project Fear did so. This was a decision by the British people, and in my view they paid a great deal less regard to the campaigns than to their own judgment. The British people got it right, and it is our job to respect that.

3.10 pm

Mr Nick Clegg (Sheffield, Hallam) (LD): Having heard the remarks made by the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), I am reminded how many fixed points in British politics have changed, and changed utterly, over the last few months. When I used to stand at the Government Dispatch Box, I could always rely on the hon. Gentleman and many other fervent Brexiteers to marry their loathing of the European Union to their passion for the traditions and prerogatives of this House. That was their raison d’être: they hated Brussels as much as they loved the House of Commons. They still hate Brussels, but they now appear to be completely tongue-tied, mute, silent, when they have an opportunity to speak up for the traditional prerogatives of the House.

A few minutes ago, my old friend and foe the hon. Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone)—it is a pity that he is not in the Chamber now—was reduced, poor man, to presenting an obsequious, feather-duster question to the Secretary of State, rather than taking the opportunity to say that this place, in keeping with the greatest traditions of the mother of all Parliaments, should hold the Government to account for what they are now going to do, because the Government do not have a mandate on how to exit the European Union following the referendum on 23 June, and that is at the heart of today’s debate.

Who would have thought it of a Government of the Conservative party, the party of tradition and the venerable principles of parliamentary representative democracy? As they tiptoe away from the great traditions that they once espoused, they are doing two things: they are reinventing history, and they are wilfully ignoring precedent. I want to say a few words about both, but I shall begin with the reinvention of history.

We heard it today, and we heard it from the Secretary of State on Monday: apparently, the referendum on 23 June produced an overwhelming vote in favour of Brexit. Apparently, everyone—except, of course, for a few misguided members of the liberal elite—voted for Brexit. It was overwhelming. There was no contest. It seems to me, however, that the dictionary definition of “overwhelming” does not conform to a very narrow vote in which one side received 17.4 million votes and the other side 16.1 million. That, in my view, is not an overwhelming mandate.
But the reinvention of history continues. Now, it seems, the Government—unique in this land—have a telepathic ability to tell us all the reasons why those 17.4 million people voted for Brexit. That is extraordinary. It is particularly extraordinary given that they have never deigned to tell a single member of our wonderful country what they think Brexit means, because they could not agree among themselves then, and they still cannot agree. Nevertheless, with astonishing, telepathic hindsight, they can tell us why everyone voted as they did—and apparently everyone voted, en masse, for exactly the same thing.

Kwasi Kwarteng: Will the right hon. Gentleman not accept that the one thing that Brexit means is that we are leaving the European Union, and will he not say on the Floor of the House that he will not try to contravene or subvert that?

Mr Clegg: As the Secretary of State said earlier, being outside the European Union, like Turkey, Switzerland and Norway, means a multitude of different things. That is now the challenge for the Government. That is what the Brexiteers cynically withheld from the British people in the run-up to 23 June because they could not agree among themselves, and that is why the House of Commons now needs to hold the Government to account.

But, not happy just with reinventing history in terms of the so-called overwhelming vote, which was actually very close—not content just to have, apparently, this telepathic wisdom, with hindsight, about why everyone voted—the Government have cast aspersions on 16.1 million of our fellow citizens who did not agree with them. I find it quite extraordinary that the Prime Minister of our country, with no mandate of her own, had the gall to get up in front of her own party conference and basically imply that if you believe, as I believe, that we have a natural affinity not just with one another here, not just with our constituents and not just with the communities that we inhabit in this country, but with people living in other countries, other time zones and other hemispheres—if, that is, you feel that there is something called British internationalism, which I believe to be a proud, liberal, British tradition—you are a citizen of nowhere. I do not think that any Government who insult more than 16 million of their fellow citizens are capable of uniting a country that was so starkly divided on 23 June.

Conor Burns (Bournemouth West) (Con): There seems to be a developing theme that the people who voted to leave were not clear about exactly what they were voting for. Does the right hon. Gentleman not recall the very clear warnings given by the then Chancellor of the Exchequer and the then Prime Minister that voting to leave meant leaving the single market? Does he not accept that leaving the European Union cannot mean the continuation of free movement and the application of European law that membership of the free market would require?

Mr Clegg: Let me answer the hon. Gentleman’s question directly. I personally take the unfashionable view that with a bit of fancy diplomatic footwork and some political intelligence, the Government could negotiate retention of our membership of the single market along with curtailment of freedom of movement. What the Government cannot do—and, funnily enough, the hon. Member for Stone was correct about this—is have membership of, or untrammelled access to, a marketplace of rules and not abide by those rules. That is what is impossible, but it was not a contradiction on the part of the British people; it is a contradiction on the part of the Government, and a self-inflicted one.

Let me now say something about precedent, for precedent is very important. Many people have talked about the history of this place, and the history of the relationship between the legislature and the Executive, but why has no one on the Government Benches cited what is, in my view, the very important precedent of John Major?

When he was Prime Minister and was faced with a very tricky negotiation on the Maastricht treaty, he made the courageous decision—and it was not a risk-free decision—to come to the House and say, “This is what I want to negotiate on behalf of the United Kingdom; do you agree or not?” There was a debate, and then a vote, on 20 and 21 November 1991. That was a stance taken with courage and delivered with clarity. Where is the courage now? Where is the clarity? Where is the willingness of this Government to put country before party? It is truly a shame that the example set by John Major is not being adopted by the followers of the present Prime Minister.

Sammy Wilson: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Clegg: I shall make some progress, if I may. I want to cite one final precedent, which has not been mentioned in the debate so far but of which I have personal experience, and which I think has a direct bearing on the debate.

When I was Deputy Prime Minister in the coalition Government, a Secretary of State—I shall come to who it was in a minute—came to me and said, “Look, I have to negotiate, on behalf of the Government, a very tricky deal with the rest of the European Union.” It was all to do with the so-called JHA opt-out, on which I am sure the hon. Member for Stone could deliver a great treatise. As he will remember, under provisions negotiated by Tony Blair, the United Kingdom fell automatically out of a bunch of measures on crime-fighting—the so-called judicial and home affairs co-operation measures—and we had to decide, as a country, which ones we were going to opt back into.

There was a great tussle and argument between the two parties in the coalition. I wanted us to opt into more measures, and the Conservatives did not. However, I was told by the Secretary of State that the one absolutely indispensable requirement for that Secretary of State was, at the beginning of the negotiations, a full debate and vote on the mandate on which the coalition would then negotiate with the other member states, and at the end, another debate and vote. Those took place, and I can give the House the dates, which I have here on my scrappy little piece of paper. On 15 July 2013, the House debated and voted on that complex negotiation on the JHA opt-out, and the concluding vote on the final package—which we as a coalition Government were bringing back to the House—took place on 10 November 2014. The House might be interested to learn that the Secretary of State who was so adamant at that time that there should be a debate and a vote on those negotiations was none other than the Prime Minister of today.
That is significant, and my final question for the Ministers is this. If it was justifiable for the House of Commons to have not only a debate but a vote at the beginning and the conclusion of a negotiation on the significant but none the less comparatively narrow matter of the JHA opt-out, why on earth are the Government not coming here today and granting the House exactly the same rights and prerogatives for something that is immeasurably more significant and that will, as so many people have said, have a bearing on life in this country for generations to come?

3.20 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Some colleagues have already said that it must be our duty now to try to knit our nation together, to put the heat and fury of the referendum campaign behind us and to see how together we can build a prosperous and successful future for the United Kingdom as the country leaves the European Union. I think that that will be easier than the tone of this debate so far would give people to believe, because I have great confidence in the British people. I have spent a lot of time talking to remain voters, both before and after the referendum, as well as obviously encouraging the leave voters, whose cause I helped to champion.

The good news is that the remain voters are not, on the whole, passionate advocates of the European ideal and the European project, and that is why we will be able to put this together. According to polling, around 10% of all voters in Britain really believe in the whole European project—a perfectly noble vision of integration, political union, monetary union, a borderless society and so forth—but they are a very small minority in our country. I am afraid that we cannot easily build a bridge to those who want to be part of a united Europe, because it was clearly the view of both sides in the referendum that Britain did not want to be part of the single currency, the political union, a borderless Europe and so forth.

However, this does mean that an awful lot of the remain voters—the overwhelming majority, in fact—voted remain not to join the full project but because they had genuine fears that when we came out of the union, we would leave the single market. They felt that that could be damaging to trade, investment and business prospects. It is on that narrow point that the House of Commons has to concentrate its activities over the next few months, because it is on that central issue that our discussions with our European partners need to concentrate.

I am conscious that the business community has one aim above all others, which is to reduce or eliminate uncertainty. Having been in business myself, I know that business is about managing uncertainties all the time, but it is of course good if we can get the politicians to make their contribution to lowering uncertainty rather than increasing it. It is important that we all work together to try to reduce the uncertainty and shorten the time in which that uncertainty exists.

I am also conscious that we can lower uncertainty in two ways. As we approach the negotiations, we must first show that we are going to go at a lively pace, because the longer they drag on, the more uncertainty will develop, the more obstacles and confusions will arise, and the longer will be the delays that can hurt. So we need pace. The second thing we can do to reduce the uncertainty is to say that we need only to discuss a limited number of things. We can narrow the framework of the negotiation. There are many consultants and advisers out there saying, “We must scope and chart every aspect of all our relationships with other European countries, be they technically single market or EU or wider. We must put them all on the table, then throw them up in the air and discuss which ones should change and how stable they are going to be.” That would be a disastrous way to proceed. It would take too long, and it would offer too many hostages to fortune.

The Government are right to say that in order to have a successful negotiation that lowers the scope for danger and downside, we need to take those discussions at a pace and ensure that we do not say too much in advance about any possible weaknesses in our negotiating position. We should not open up issues for negotiation that do not need to be negotiated, and we should take on board only those issues that are a genuine worry to those on the other negotiating side and that need to be taken seriously because they have some powers over them.

The United Kingdom has voted to take back control. That was what Vote Leave was all about. That was the slogan throughout the campaign, and when asked to define it more, the leave side said that we were voting to take back control of laws, money and borders. So we know what cannot be negotiated away. We also know that the main area of uncertainty is how we are going to trade with the single market when we cannot technically be part of it because it includes freedom of movement and wide-ranging law codes over things that go well beyond the conduct of trade and commerce. It is not a segregated, integrated whole within the European Union; it is a central part of it and part of a very big consolidated treaty.

Jonathan Edwards: The Secretary of State said something very interesting earlier when he said that he hoped to negotiate a better economic deal than membership of the single market. As a prominent Brexiteer, can the right hon. Gentleman explain how that will be possible?

John Redwood: I do not recall the Secretary of State saying that at all. He was saying that we could have a better relationship than simply relying on World Trade Organisation rules. I have good news, however. If we were to have to fall back on WTO rules, this country would be able to trade perfectly successfully with the rest of the EU and would be free to have much better trade deals with the rest of the world, which we have been impeded from having all the time we have been in the EU. Should there have to be tariffs, there would be many more tariffs collected on European imports into Britain, so we would have a lot of money to spend. We could give that money back to British people, so they would not actually be worse off as a result of the tariffs. Whereas, if we went the other way, the tariffs would be a great embarrassment to our European partners. I am very optimistic about our European partners. I think that they will want tariff-free trade. I do not see Germany or France queueing up to impose tariffs on us, so I hope that we will be able to get through this quite quickly and reassure them that we do not want to put tariffs on their trade either.
Mr Jenkin: Is it not also incumbent on the Government to be mindful that article 50 was not put into the Lisbon treaty to make it less complicated to leave the European Union? If we are to include too many things under article 50 that strait into mixed competences, we will finish up with an agreement that requires unanimity. That would lead to a far more protracted negotiation than if we try to keep things simple. In fact, it would be an advantage to business if we could complete this in a much shorter period than the two years specified under the article 50 process.

John Redwood: Indeed. This is not a prediction, because I know that a lot of people have lots of good and bad reasons to want to delay and make this more complicated, but it would be quite possible to negotiate the trade issue very quickly.

We have two models available. My preferred model would be to carry on trading tariff free without new barriers, as we are at the moment. That is the most sensible model to adopt, and I think it makes even more sense for our partners, who are much more successful at selling to us than we are to them. I have not yet heard them say that they want to impose barriers. Then there is the WTO most-favoured-nation model, which would also be fine. If one wishes to have a successful, quick and strong negotiation, one should not want anything. We do not want anything from our former partners. We want them to get on and develop their political union in the way that they want, in which we have been impeding them, and we want to be free to run our own affairs in an orderly and friendly way.

We want to have even more trade with our European partners. We want more investment agreements, more research collaborations, more student exchanges and more of all the other good things we have. Those things are not at risk, and there will be an enormous amount of good will from a more united United Kingdom. [Interruption.] Opposition Members want to split us up by saying that everything has to go wrong. If they want us to negotiate successfully, they should show confidence and optimism—let us show that our trade is not at risk. Let us be confident in the position they would like us to strike in the negotiations, but they are not yet ready to do so. I understand that, but it was in their power to do so. They could have tabled a motion to try to veto an article 50 letter, had they wanted to, but they were very wise not to do so because many of their constituents would have seen it as an attempt to thwart the will of the people in the vote. There is nothing stopping this great Parliament doing those things.

I am pleased that the Secretary of State has already made two statements and given evidence to two Select Committee investigations. He was here in person today to answer the Opposition debate. We do not always get the courtesy of having the Secretary of State before us in an Opposition day debate. That augurs well for there being more scrutiny.

I am pleased that the main way we will leave the European Union is by repealing the European Communities Act 1972, because that means that the central process will be a long constitutional Bill—not long in length or wordage. I hope, but in terms of proceedings, as I am sure SNP Members will want to cull over every “and” and comma, and they have every right to do so, up to a point. Parliament will consider that legislation and vote accordingly. That is exactly as it should be. It will be a great celebration of our parliamentary democracy, which the majority voted to strengthen, that we do it by parliamentary means.

The right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband), the former leader of the Labour party, correctly said that all the European law will at that point become British law—that is the irony of it—but we will do that for the purposes of continuity. Thereafter, we in this House will be able to judge whether it is wise or necessary to repeal or amend any part of that legislation. If it would have a direct bearing on our trade with the European Union, it would not be a good idea to do that without knowing that the EU was happy or that it would not react unreasonably. For example, when selling into a market, one needs to meet the product requirements, and things like product standards will be part of that continuation of the legislation.

The only thing about the single market that is really worthwhile—it is mainly very bureaucratic, expensive and pretty anti-enterprise—is that it provides common product specifications and standards, so that if a washing machine is saleable in France, it is also saleable in Greece. The great news is that when we are out of the EU, that will still be true. It is an advantage for an American exporter into the EU, just as it is for a UK exporter into the EU. When we are in a similar position to America—a friendly independent country trading with the EU from the outside—we will get the full benefit of that.

Let us bring the country together. Let us show that we can be more prosperous and more successful. Let us show that our trade is not at risk. Let us be confident in our negotiation. Let us not use this place to make all manner of problems that will give those who want to wreck our negotiation good comfort, support or extra research. Let us show how everything we do can create more jobs, more trade and more investment.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): After the next speaker, the time limit will drop to six minutes.
3.33 pm

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): I say gently to the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) that, listening to what he just said about the single market, one could easily forget that the late Baroness Thatcher was one of its great advocates.

The debate thus far has demonstrated that some Members find it rather difficult to leave behind the arguments and stances taken during the referendum. We must, as my right hon. Friend, give up the veto in order to create it. She did not accept my advice, and I think she came to regret that.

Hilary Benn: I think the House is grateful for that history lesson. I hope the right hon. Gentleman will undertake that task. One is to minimise uncertainty—a word that we have heard a great deal of in this debate. The second is to be clear about the timing and the content of the negotiation. The third is to protect the things that we value that have come from Europe, and the fourth is to think creatively about how we build a new kind of relationship with Europe as we leave the institutions.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): The Secretary of State said that he wanted to minimise uncertainty. He must reflect on that and give himself marks out of 10 on how he thinks he is doing at the moment. Let me take one example: the British Chambers of Commerce in Germany is hosting a conference here in Westminster tomorrow on the impact of Brexit on the City of London and the financial services sector. One issue preoccupying them is that of passporting. It is uncertainty on that issue that is already creating a wound and calm the fears that have been created, in particular on the part of the 48%.

I was just going to say that some of the uncertainty is inevitable and will not be resolved until the negotiating process has been concluded, but some of it is the result of different things being said by different members of the Government—one has to acknowledge that—as well as the things that have been left unsaid, which may lead others to draw conclusions and then act on them in the absence of clarity.

The announcement by Nissan that it will not invest any more in this country without guarantees from the Government is indeed unwelcome, but it is entirely understandable. What car manufacturer—my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) talked about Jaguar Land Rover—will invest in additional capacity if there is still some doubt that we might leave with no agreement on trade and tumble out on World Trade Organisation terms, which would lead to those cars facing a tariff? I accept that, in the end, we are likely to get an agreement in which there are no tariffs on manufactured goods, and, frankly, the sooner that that can be made clear, the better. There are those who argue that it would be perfectly possible within the next two years provided by article 50 not only to negotiate the mechanics of our withdrawal but to conclude a new trading agreement that will give access to the single market for our goods and our services, which have not been much talked about but my hon. Friend made the point that 80% of our economy depends on services. Those who argue that may be right, but I somehow doubt it.

Mr Jenkin rose—

Hilary Benn: I will not take any more interventions, because there are many other colleagues who wish to speak.

If that is the case, we will clearly need a transitional agreement to cover the time after we have left the European Union until the moment when a final agreement on trade and market access has been reached. I listened very carefully to what the Secretary of State had to say about that when I asked him a question on Monday. The Government need to say now, explicitly, that if we have not been able to conclude such an agreement by the end of the two years—there is absolutely no guarantee that all 27 member states will agree to extend the period—we will seek that transitional arrangement, because that would help to boost business confidence.

The second aspect of uncertainty is its impact on people. Unfortunately, in the past couple of weeks, a number of statements have been made about EU nationals and overseas workers here in the UK. I welcome the fact that it now appears that there will not be a requirement on companies to publish lists of overseas workers, but a reference was made to overseas doctors, who make a huge and important contribution to the NHS, being able to stay here for an interim period until such time as we have trained more doctors in Britain, which is a good thing. It was unwise to talk about overseas students as if they are a problem to be cracked down on, and it was a mistake to describe EU citizens who are living here, working here and paying tax here as a card to be used in negotiations. Words matter. They are not a card; they are people; and they listen intently to what is said because they realise Ministers are talking about them, and they take it personally and they feel unwanted.
That is very damaging to our reputation as a country that has always welcomed people who want to come here to work, to study and to contribute.

I accept that the 52% of people who voted to leave sent us a message about their wish to control immigration from the EU, although many of the people I spoke to during the referendum campaign who made that argument accepted that there would be a continuing need for workers to come, to bring their skills and to contribute to our society in so many different businesses and sectors. So I encourage Ministers to offer as much reassurance as possible now to those EU citizens about their likely future status, while recognising, because it is in our self-interest to do so, that the way in which we approach that matter will have an impact on the spirit in which the other 27 member states, from which those people come, approach the negotiations that we are about to embark on, and to provide some clarity about how the Government plan to balance the desire to control free movement with continued access—

Anna Soubry: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way for just a minute?

Hilary Benn: I think that I have run out of my minutes, so I hope that the right hon. Lady will forgive me if I do not.

We need clarity about how the Government propose to handle that trade-off in relation to access to the single market, given that we know from statements that have been made and signals that have been sent that the EU wants to set its face against any change to the four freedoms, and it has also made it pretty clear that it wishes to demonstrate to us and, through our experience, to others that there is a cost to leaving the EU.

Anna Soubry: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that there is a very grave danger when we talk about immigration of extrapolating from the referendum result that there is a desire to reduce immigration? The two great cities that have benefited and have overwhelming immigrant populations—London and Leicester—voted to remain.

Hilary Benn: The right hon. Lady is absolutely right and brings me neatly to the point that I was about to make about one of the great industries in our capital city: the impact on the services sector, including financial services, and the City of London, which is a network built on relationships, technology and agreements with the EU and, through it, with other countries. I would describe it as a delicate ecosystem, part of which is built on managing risk. Members should not be terribly surprised if those who manage risk for a living, looking at the risks that they think that they might face from not getting an agreement that would allow them to carry on on what they have been doing, draw their own conclusions about where they will put their business, where they will do their business and where they will employ their staff in future.

On the great repeal Bill, mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster North, I have christened it the great incorporation Bill. Enactment, incorporation—are there any more suggestions? I trust that the Bill will make it clear to workers that their employment rights will be protected and to people who care passionately about the environment that the environmental protections that have come from our membership of the EU will be maintained in future.

Now, in all this, there must be transparency. I accept the argument that it would be unreasonable for the Government to reveal their detailed negotiating plan and their tactics before advancing their case in those negotiations, but that is not the same as being unwilling to answer questions about what our negotiating objectives are, and it is not the same as being unwilling to share the assessments that the Government have made about the possible consequences of leaving the EU.

On the first, the questions are very simple. Do the Government intend to remain in the Euratom treaty? Do they wish to continue to be part of the European Medicines Agency—which, by the way, is based in London—Europol and the European arrest warrant? What about the European Aviation Safety Authority, the European Patent Office and the European Banking Authority? Those are very straightforward questions about the Government’s negotiating objective when they talk to the other 27 member states.

On the second, we all saw the story on the front pages of The Times and The Guardian yesterday about the alleged draft Cabinet Committee paper that talks about the loss of GDP that we can expect and the detrimental impact on tax revenues. It is good that the Government are making assessments; it would be nice if they could be shared with the House, as well as with The Guardian and The Times, because we need to know the consequences of the different options that are being looked at.

My final point is about a new relationship with the European Union in the areas where co-operation has been to our mutual benefit—in particular, security, defence and foreign policy. It is essential—that think of the debate that we had on Aleppo and Syria yesterday—that we continue to co-operate closely with our European neighbours, even though we are leaving the institutions of the European Union. This will be a very complex and daunting process, and I do not envy Ministers, because having to do this on top of meeting all the other demands of a ministerial job is not something that any of us would relish, but it is the responsibility of Members in all parts of the Chamber to make sure that we scrutinise and hold the Government to account as they give effect to the decision that the British people have made.

The point has been made that as one of the main reasons advanced by those who said that we should leave was that it would restore the sovereignty of the House, Ministers cannot now argue that exercising sovereignty should not extend to the biggest challenge that the country has faced since the end of the second world war. Ministers need to understand that when we get to the end of the negotiations, this House will and must take a view on the nature of the agreement that the Government have negotiated, because it will affect every single one of us, our children, and all the generations that will come after us.

3.45 pm

Nicky Morgan (Loughborough) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), who will, I suspect, play a key part in
scrutinising, on behalf of this House, the negotiations with the EU over the next few months, years and decades.

I have managed to avoid debating the European Union, though debating it has been a customary habit of many members of my party for a number of years; I did so by becoming a Minister, although I was the EU budget Minister and enjoyed undergoing scrutiny by my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) as Chairman of the European Scrutiny Committee.

Let me make it very clear, as hon. Members in all parts of the Chamber have, that although I wanted us to remain a member of the European Union, I accept the result of 23 June. That is why I think that the Government amendment can be supported by everyone who has spoken so far. However, once the article 50 negotiations are completed, we, from outside the European Union, will have a wholly different relationship with EU member states. That is why I also support the Labour motion—because it recognises that leaving the EU is the defining issue facing the United Kingdom. It was the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) who said that the decisions that we take over the next few months and years in Parliament will shape this country for decades and generations to come. That is a responsibility that we all need to take very seriously, and that we should undertake, as the shadow Secretary of State said, without point scoring and partisanship.

Clearly, the key question will be about access to the single market, and balancing that with the issues around freedom of movement and immigration control. I was struck by the fact that the words “single market” were nowhere in the Secretary of State’s statement to Parliament on 5 September; I made that point to him then. Not mentioning it will clearly not be tenable. The relationship between the single market and freedom of movement was not on the ballot paper, and it is what we will be discussing in this House for months to come.

As I have already said to my hon. Friend the Member for Stone, the Conservative party’s 2015 manifesto is clear about what we want from Europe. We—that is, all Members of Parliament elected on the Conservative party manifesto in 2015—say yes to the single market. The Prime Minister, in her speech to the Conservative party conference, said very clearly that we want “to give British companies the maximum freedom to trade with and operate in the Single Market”.

For anyone to say that the single market will not be part of the discussions, and that just because we are repealing the European Communities Act 1972 we will not discuss the single market, is not correct.

Sir William Cash: Does my right hon. Friend accept that it is impossible for us to repeal the 1972 Act on the one hand, which is the endgame, and on the other to remain subject to the jurisdiction of the European Court within the single market? We trade into the single market, but we are not in the single market; that is the point.

Nicky Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend very much indeed for that intervention. The European Communities Act 1972 was introduced a long time before the single market was envisaged by, as we have heard, a former Prime Minister. As someone who was engaged in commercial negotiations for 16 years before I came to the House, I think that anything is possible in negotiation, as the former Deputy Prime Minister said.

I want to make three quick points. First, I want to pick up the point made by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke). I was concerned to hear that last week in an interview given by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster that the Cabinet had not been consulted on the timing of the triggering of article 50, and that that had been decided by a small group of people as something to be announced at the Conservative party conference. We have been arguing that Parliament must be involved in scrutiny decisions, but the Cabinet must be kept fully informed of key decisions on our leaving the European Union.

Secondly, we heard from the right hon. Member for Leeds Central about the status of EU citizens. I was heartbroken to receive an email from a constituent—I suspect that it is not the only one that I or, indeed, many of us will receive—who has moved here from elsewhere in the EU. She has gone through a difficult court case on the custody of her children, and has settled in the United Kingdom. There are restrictions on where those children can travel within the EU. She said to me “Yet as EU citizens, it is becoming increasingly clear that it will become near impossible for us to continue living in the UK. I, for one, will have great difficulty finding employment”—she has a PhD, awarded here—“and using my expertise because I am not British.”

That is not the country that I want to see. I do not think that this is the country that the Government or Parliament wants to see. That is not the message that we want to give about this country, which has been built on the skills of those who have come here for generations. I suspect that many of us in the Chamber are here because our forefathers moved to this country and took advantage of the safety that we provide.

Finally, those who are asking questions about the scrutiny by Parliament of these fundamental negotiations are not trying to thwart the will of the people. I resent that implication—I resent it from newspapers, I resent it from Ministers, and I resent it from the briefers and spinners at the centre of Government. It only encourages me to ask more questions, and I will work with colleagues in the Government and colleagues across the House to ask those questions. It is Parliament’s duty to scrutinise the Executive. I have stood at the Dispatch Box, and I have been scrutinised by Parliament—rightly so. Now I am on the Back Benches I will scrutinise the Executive. Our constituents send us to Westminster as Members of Parliament to ask the questions that they cannot put to Ministers themselves. Colleagues, we must take every opportunity to ask those questions to get the best possible deal for this country as we leave the European Union.

3.53 pm

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), who gave a powerful speech. I agreed with everything she said, and I want to reiterate something that she said at the end and the beginning of her speech.
Like the right hon. Lady, I campaigned to remain in the European Union but, like her, I accept the result of the referendum. Although the Prime Minister and her Ministers have spent the past few months parroting the mantra “Brexit means Brexit”, that is simply meaningless tautology. People voted leave for many different reasons, and Brexit could take many different forms. A majority of my constituents voted leave for various reasons, but they did not vote leave to become poorer, they did not vote leave for their wages to drop, and they did not vote leave to lose their job. I urge the Government to bear that in mind in everything they do.

Members on both sides of the House, from different corners of our country, have a hugely important job to do. Our job is not to rerun the referendum, nor is it to block our exit from the EU. It is to hold the Government to account and make sure that they secure the best possible deal for the country and our constituents.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): My hon. Friend makes an important point. She, like me, represents a midlands constituency, and therefore she, like me, will want some answers on what the Government’s future relationship with the single market will be, bearing in mind that it was a previous Conservative Government who took us into it. More importantly, companies such as Jaguar Land Rover and Nissan want to know those answers for the purpose of future investment, because Jaguar Land Rover has invested a lot of money in the midlands. Years ago Nissan was going to invest in Coventry but could not get regional aid, and that is why we went into the single market.

Emma Reynolds: I agree entirely. Jaguar Land Rover is also a very important company in my constituency. Those companies want clarity from the Government. The Brexit Minister told the House earlier today that he has made several statements and appeared before several Select Committees, but he has said almost entirely nothing. We need clarity and proper parliamentary scrutiny. That does not mean seeking to thwart the will of the people, as the right hon. Member for Loughborough said so powerfully.

I will focus my remarks on three tests that I want to put to the Government. First, are they driven by the national interest or their party’s interest? So far, regrettably, their record is not good. Was it purely a coincidence that the Prime Minister’s announcement that we would invoke article 50 by the end of March 2017 happened to be on the first day of the Conservative party conference? Was it just a coincidence that she wanted to reassure her party faithful that she, having been a lukewarm remainer, actually thinks that we should leave the EU?

Equally, the Conservative party’s interest was uppermost in the Prime Minister’s mind when she claimed that “there is no such thing as a choice between ‘soft Brexit’ and ‘hard Brexit’”, because she knows that her party is divided on the issue. That is not only bizarre, but wrong. If there was no such distinction, why did the pound slump to a 31-year low days after the Tory party conference, due to fears of a hard Brexit? If there is no such distinction, why has the Treasury said that a hard Brexit could cost £66 billion a year in lost revenue and that the economy will be between 5% and 9% smaller than it would be if we stay in the single market? If there is no such distinction, why has Nissan said that there will be no further investment in its UK plants if it does not know whether in future it will face tariffs on its exports to the rest of the EU?

It is clear to me that some Tory Members—we have heard it already today—are happy to trade with the rest of the EU, which is still our main trading partner, on WTO terms. Worryingly, the International Development Secretary seems to be in that category. However, other right hon. and hon. Members on the Conservative Benches disagree. The right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) called it “bonkers.” She is right, because it would mean tariffs on our exports: 10% on cars, 20% on beer and whisky, and obviously non-tariff barriers on trade.

The Conservative party’s 2015 manifesto—the right hon. Member for Loughborough has already mentioned this, but it is worth repeating—stressed:

“We benefit from the Single Market... We are clear about what we want from Europe. We say: yes to the Single Market.”

That is the basis on which the Conservatives were elected to government. They were right last year, which is why the Government must push to retain access to the single market.

Secondly—this is a really difficult test—can the Government mitigate the risks of leaving and maximise the opportunities? Again, so far the record is not good. Many right hon. and hon. Members on the Conservative Benches seem to believe that there are only upsides to leaving the EU, but it is obvious that there are some fundamental risks to our economy if we get this wrong. The Government should level with people and say, “Exiting the EU will not be straightforward; it will be difficult, sensitive and, indeed, risky.”

I believe that the Government must aim for a soft Brexit. That means having the best possible access to the single market without tariff and non-tariff barriers, and retaining workers’ rights, environmental and consumer protections and the security measures that are so vital to keeping our country safe. But I also believe that we need to look at some restrictions on free movement. I had many conversations with constituents in Wolverhampton who voted to leave the EU. They did so for a variety of reasons, but one of those was immigration. Some say that reconciling the two issues is impossible, but within the European economic area Norway has an emergency brake on free movement and Liechtenstein has controls over it, and within the four freedoms of people, capital, goods and services in the EU, there is not absolute free movement of services.

My third test—I will be brief, as I am going to run out of time—is that the Government should not be in denial about the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn). We need to negotiate a transition period. If we are to negotiate a free trade deal with the rest of the EU, there is going to be a cliff edge between exiting, including closing the article 50 negotiations, and the conclusion of that free trade deal. That will take years; it will be a mixed deal and national Parliaments throughout the 27 member states will have to ratify it. I hope that the Brexit Secretary of State will not be in denial about that issue, which is one of the most important aspects of our renegotiation. I also hope that the Government will start to do a lot better.
Anna Soubry (Bromsgrove) (Con): I start by saying that I wholly endorse and support the wise words of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan). I also wholly endorse and support the wise words of my new friend, the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband). Before anybody listening to this speech or reading about it elsewhere has a problem with that, I should also agree with the short intervention made by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve).

Get real. We are living in extraordinary times, and incredible things have happened. Who would have believed a year ago that we would be here having this debate after all that has taken place? Increasingly, and rightly, many of us will now be taking a cross-party approach to these issues. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield said, as we leave the EU—I accept the verdict, the referendum result—we face difficult, dangerous times. Putting our country and the interests of all our constituents first transcends everything, and that includes the normal party political divide.

I pay handsome tribute also to the wise speech—except for when it got partisan—made by the hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer). I agree with him. We are in difficult, dangerous times and we tread with great care. As he rightly said, there was one question on that ballot paper and it is wrong to assume that a whole series of mandates flow from that one simple and straightforward question. With great respect to the Prime Minister, her Cabinet and all those in government, we are using the answer to that question as an excuse for other mandates. That is simply wrong.

I am concerned about the extrapolation—a new buzzword, perhaps—that involves our just saying, “Oh well—52% of the British people apparently voted for controls on immigration.” The hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds) mentioned people concerned about immigration. She should tread carefully. When people said they were concerned about immigration, I suspect that what they were really asking for was not control—that might make it go up—but less immigration.

I gently say to the hon. Lady that we have to be true to what we believe in. It is so important that, in the debate now unfolding about immigration, we are brave and true to what we believe in and take people on. My right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough and I stood in Loughborough market on the day of the referendum and had that debate, but the tragedy was that by that time it was too late. The British people at heart are good and tolerant; if we make the debate, they will understand the huge benefit that migration has brought to our country for centuries.

Kwasi Kwarteng: I agree with many of the things my right hon. Friend has said about immigration, but did she not stand in 2015 and, I believe, in 2010 on a clear Conservative party manifesto commitment to reduce net immigration to tens of thousands?

Anna Soubry: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I accept what he says, but let me say here and now that we have to abandon that target; we cannot keep it. We know the reality: people come here to work. In simple terms, Sir, who is going to do the jobs of those people who come here? There seems to be some nonsensical idea that, with a bit of upskilling here and a bit of upskilling there, we will replace the millions and millions of people who come and work not just in those low-skilled jobs, but right the way through to the highest levels of research and development—the great entrepreneurs. We should be singing out about this great country of ours; we should be making it clear that we are open for business and that we are open to people, as we always have been, because they contribute to our country in not only economic but cultural terms. We are in grave danger if we extrapolate in a way that I believe is not at the core of being British.

Emma Reynolds: I agree with a lot of what the right hon. Lady has said, and I made the same arguments to people during the referendum campaign. All I would say is that there is a spectrum here; there is a space between no free movement and free movement in its entirety. I am not arguing for no European immigration—I think these people have made great contributions to our country—but I do think we need to look at restrictions in some sectors and some areas. I think that would be respecting the mandate.

Anna Soubry: I am not going to demur from what the hon. Lady says.

What all this really proves is the absolute need for this place to do what the motion and the Government amendment say, which is to have these debates as we go forward, to shape our new relationship with Europe. All these issues have to be debated, so I fully agree with everything that has been said, and I will go one step further: the more I hear, and the more I think about this and listen to the learned and wise words of people such as my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield, the more I am coming to the perhaps very quick conclusion that this place must vote on article 50. I really think that it is imperative that we do that.

In the short time that is available to me, I just want to add one thing. We do not come here just to have these rather esoterical debates. A lot of people listening to this debate might think that, yet again, this is politicians talking in terms and in ways that do not relate to what is really happening out there in the real world. What is happening out there in the real world is that British business is in a very difficult and serious predicament. We have heard about the value of the pound, which is at this record 30-year low. What does that mean? It means that a great company such as Freshcut Foods in my constituency is seeing its best EU workers leaving; they feel, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough says, that they have no place here. People are finding, as the University of Nottingham has said to me, that they can no longer recruit. The university has lost some of its best academics because those people no longer feel welcome and valued in our country. I am sorry, but it has to be said: we should be hanging our heads in shame that that is the feeling of real people—real constituents of mine—and I will continue to speak out on their behalf.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend give way?
Anna Soubry: I cannot. I am so sorry.

I also want to say this, because it is really important. We talk about wanting to build a consensus, and Members such as the right hon. Member for Doncaster North have said that if we want to build a consensus, we will have to bring in the 48% who voted for us to remain in the European Union. I do not agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) when he said that they were rejecting the European Union. Absolute nonsense! They were positively voting for our membership of the European Union, and that included membership of the single market and free movement of workers. We ignore those brave, good people at our great peril, but so many of them feel that they have been forgotten. They are invariably abused on social media. I have no difficulty in standing here and saying that I will not give up on the 48%, and I will go further. I think there is a real movement now among many people who voted leave; as Brexit unravels, and they see the reality of that referendum result, many are regretting their vote, and there is a good chance that the 48% may in due course actually become the majority.

Finally, I say gently to my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), that there is a real danger in our country. Some 75% of young voters voted remain, and many of them feel that an older generation has robbed them of their future. Our job is to make sure that everybody is involved and we get the best deal for everybody in our country as we now leave the European Union.

4.9 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): Unlike some of the fantasists and ideologues on the Government Benches who believe that Brexit is somehow a pain-free process, I live in the real world. We do not deny that the British people have voted to leave the European Union, but Labour Members are determined to achieve a Brexit for working people—not a hard Brexit or a Brexit at breakneck speed, but a Brexit that does not damage Britain’s national interests, the interests of our economy and the interests of our workers.

We are also determined—I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry)—for her outstanding speech—to ensure that Parliament has the opportunity to call the Government to account during the next stages. I particularly pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) for her outstanding speech—to ensure that Parliament has the opportunity to call the Government to account during the next stages. I particularly pay tribute to my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), who is an outstanding lawyer. Quite rightly, he has led on the argument that this House should call the Government to account.

I want to make three points. First, on Jaguar Land Rover, may I tell a story? About three months ago, I was getting out of my car in Edwards Road, and I heard a voice call, “Jack”. It was Warren, a big bear of a man with a beard. I first met him at a jobs fair we organised four years ago, and he got an apprenticeship at Jaguar Land Rover. He said, “Come with me. I want you to meet my partner and her mum and dad.” He showed me a little Edwardian house. He said, “Jack, I can’t believe it. We are moving into the house of my dreams, I am with the woman of my dreams, and it is all because I’ve got a good and secure job in the Jaguar plant.” Forgive me for saying it, but this is what drives me on. As I said earlier, in an area which is rich in talent but one of the poorest in the country, I do not want to see the Warrens of this world let down during the next stages.

I was deeply involved in the drive to secure the future of Jaguar Land Rover back in 2010. It has gone from strength to strength ever since. For example, the new engine plant in Wolverhampton employs 42,000 people. I want to pay tribute to the workforce, but also to one of the most outstanding, if not the most outstanding, chief executive with whom I have ever worked, Ralf Speth. It is a world-class company, and when it expresses concerns about the consequences for it of hard Brexit—not being able to sell without tariffs into the European Union—its voice must be listened to.

The second point is about workers’ rights. The Secretary of State said, “Don’t worry. All will be okay.” I do not believe that. I was a Brexiteer back in the 1970s. What changed my mind was social Europe in the 1980s. I remember taking the case of the Eastbourne dustmen to the European Court of Justice, because the then Conservative Government had refused to extend TUPE to cover 6 million public servants, with the terrible consequences that tens of thousands of jobs were privatised without protection, pay was cut in half and the workforce was sometimes cut by a third.

Mr Jim Cunningham: A good clue to what might happen to trade union rights or industrial rights after Brexit can be seen—it is dead simple—by looking at the last trade union legislation.

Jack Dromey: My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

Now, as in the 1980s, some of the leading Brexiteers are the ones who talk forever about red tape. I call that workers’ rights. When they say, “Trust us”, I reply, “What? Trust the same people who ran a disreputable campaign?” They promised £350 million a week for the national health service, when they knew damn well that there was no possibility of delivering it.

My third and final point is on the very difficult debate about immigration. I must say that the way that some in the Brexit camp played the race and immigration card in the referendum campaign was nothing short of shameful with, on the one hand, that infamous poster with Nigel Farage and—dare I say it?—on the other hand, the current Foreign Secretary talking about the tens of millions of Turks who might come to our country. The consequences have been very serious. There has been a rise in hate crime in my constituency. Poles in Erdington High Street have been told, “Go back home.” An Afro-Caribbean man who has been here for 40 years was told, “Go back home.” So was a Kashmuri taxi driver who has been here for 35 years. An Asian train guard was threatened by a large aggressive white man. The guard was shutting the doors when the man told him to hang on because his mates were five minutes away. The guard said that the train had to go. The white man pointed his finger an inch from the guard’s nose and said, “Oh no you don’t. We make the rules now.”

I thought that that kind of brutish behaviour was something of the past. Forgive me for raising this. My dad came from County Cork to dig roads, and my mother came from Tipperary to train as a nurse. I was 13 years old when my dad told me for the first time—and I could not believe this, because I adored him, but he could not look me in the eyes, and was looking down at the floor—about what it was like, when he arrived, looking for lodging houses in Kilburn and Cricklewood and seeing those infamous signs: “No dogs. No Irish.”

I thought that we had fundamentally changed as a
country, but this country has been scarred by the way the referendum campaign was conducted.

I recognise that during the next stages there will be a difficult debate. On the one hand we have the needs of the economy and the national health service, but on the other we have to listen to the voice of the millions who, from discontent, voted Brexit. We have to ensure that no one in our country is left behind. Getting that balance right will be immensely difficult. I hope all parties—certainly this is what we in the Labour party will do—will make sure that we do not have a repeat of the shameful, divisive rhetoric. The consequences of that rhetoric for the people we represent are very serious indeed. When I go into a local secondary school to meet a diverse group of 16 and 17-year-old pupils and am told that on the day after the referendum they were asking whether they would be sent back home, and that the following week some of them were racially abused in the street, it is clear to me that we have to stand together and say that while we must absolutely have a debate about the future, it must never again be a debate scarred by racism.

4.16 pm

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): I want to return to the topic under debate, which is how this House will scrutinise the Brexit process. To do that, we need to go back to first principles. What is the power and authority of this House? What is the sovereignty of Parliament, and where does it come from? Here, I take a view that will be popular with the SNP. I believe that the sovereignty of Parliament is delegated by the British people. We do not have sovereignty in this House in a vacuum. It is not that God suddenly created the House of Commons and said it would be sovereign over the United Kingdom. Every five years, the British people delegate their sovereignty and rights to us, to implement as we see fit; we then present ourselves for re-election when that period is ended.

Within that, we have had a referendum. It is fascinating to hear from all sides, left, right and centre, that everyone has accepted the result and that the will of the British people must be obeyed, respected and followed—

[Interruption.] That is the will of the people of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, which, I am glad to say, includes the good people and crofters of Na h-Eileanan an Iar. That needs to be put into practice.

We also know, because this is the legal advice that has gone unchallenged, that the only legal way of leaving the European Union is to exercise article 50. We therefore know that the vote on 23 June was a vote to exercise article 50. All that is under debate is the point at which that is done; the big decision has been taken by the British people.

Chris Bryant: The hon. Gentleman and I are in rather similar positions. The Rhondda voted to leave, but I support remain; North East Somerset voted to remain, but he supports leave. Given what he has said about sovereignty, does he fully accept that all of us in this House are sent not as delegates but as representatives, and owe to our constituents our conscience as much as our vote?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman should check the record. Unfortunately, North East Somerset was not counted separately; we were infected by the votes of people in Bath. I am pretty confident that the wise people of rural Somerset voted to leave while the urbanites in Bath voted to remain.

Once Parliament has used that delegated authority to ask the people, who after all are our employers, what they will be, it must be followed. Everybody accepts that, so we come to the point of debating when we will put the notice under article 50 to the European Council so that it knows that that is our decision.

That is properly determined by the Government, which is where we get into the constitutional norms. You, Mr Speaker, have raised the standard of parliamentary scrutiny of the Executive in the past six or seven years to a proper height. I am strongly supportive of that continuing. We should all, particularly Back Benchers of the governing party, remember that we are here to hold the Government to account, and not just willy-nilly to support it, but within that we must recognise that there is a proper and constitutional sphere for Government activity. There is and long has been a separation of powers. The Government introduce their policy and their legislation to get it through, and they have the clear responsibility for the negotiation of treaties.

Against that, no Government can exist unless they have the confidence of the House. As I understand it, if at any day the Leader of the Opposition chooses to table a vote of no confidence in Her Majesty’s Government, Mr Speaker will take it urgently. Therefore, if the House resents or opposes any part of the negotiation or discussion, the Government may be removed and a new one put in their place. That does not mean that we should prevent the Government from exercising the proper role of the Executive. The Government are answerable to us in how they use that power. How often that happens has already been shown: we have had two statements from the Brexit Secretary; and a Select Committee has just been set up—it was voted for last night—that will hold the two new Departments to account and have hearings.

As it happens, I think there will be a vote on article 50. May I draw the House’s attention to Standing Orders Nos. 143(1)(ii) and 143(1)(vi), which provide for the type of documents that go to the European Scrutiny Committee for consideration? It is very hard to see the exercise of article 50 falling outside the definition listed in Standing Order No. 143. It seems to me that the European Scrutiny Committee, which has the responsibility for determining what matters are of sufficient legal and political importance to be debated, would decide that the exercise of article 50 meets that test for legal and political significance. Although it is right for the Government to determine the date, and although it is a proper exercise both of the prerogative and of the Executive arm of our system, none the less under our Standing Orders it will almost certainly come before the House, as will the other parts of the process, such as the great repeal Bill.

The great repeal Bill is an interesting approach but a very sensible one that the Government have decided on because it gives certainty. We have heard calls for certainty from the Opposition Benches again and again.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Business certainty.
Mr Rees-Mogg: The voice of Scunthorpe speaks and rightly calls from a height for business certainty. Business will have certainty because the law will not change on the day we leave. All the laws will have been repatriated. They will be our laws rather than laws that are domesticated, as they currently are, through the European Communities Act 1972. It then becomes a matter for routine political debate as to whether we keep the regulations that have come from the European Union or get rid of them. I have a feeling that I would want to get rid of rather more than Opposition Members would, but then I must put that to the electorate of North East Somerset, and the hon. Gentleman must put it to the electors of Scunthorpe, and we will find out what the people want.

That is the great prize of Brexit. For as we debate how this House will scrutinise, suddenly we are in charge of scrutinising everything. We have not delegated our powers to Brussels to determine how we are regulated with a mere cursory glance over the top when the rules come pouring in. We have given back to this House the right to determine how we are governed.

The motion, therefore, is misplaced and misfires. It suggests that there will not be proper scrutiny of the Executive in the process of leaving, which is wrong. There is, every step of the way, going to be considerable scrutiny, which has already started. It implies that the situation might be worse than it was before, when the reverse is true. We suddenly recapture that ancient power we have had: to seek redress of grievance, because the Government cannot say “Not decided here”; to legislate, because our laws cannot be overturned by judges in a foreign land; and to hold the Government to account on behalf of our electors.

That is the great democratic prize and it is from this that our prosperity will come, because we know that our prosperity does not exist in a vacuum. It comes because of our constitutional systems that allow for stability, business, the rule of law and capitalism to flourish. When we are doing it for ourselves, it will be better, it will be stronger and it will be more democratic.

4.26 pm

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), his mellifluous tones and his unbridled optimism for the future of the country, which some of us do not share in quite the same rose-tinted way.

Leaving the European Union tears up a 50-year-old strategy that sought to replace our imperial past with closer economic and political co-operation with the European Union democracies. One thing is now certain: unravelling 45 years of economic integration and political co-operation with our nearest neighbours is not going to be easy and it is certainly not going to be cost-free.

The new Administration has made a very worrying and dangerous start: the meaningless chant of “Brexit means Brexit”; the imperial-style announcements from on high at Tory party conference; and the spectacle of the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis) sneering that parliamentary sovereignty is “not decided here”, now the| the Back Bench to his ministerial limousine. This arrogance ill-suits an Administration with no mandate for pursuing a hard Brexit by diktat, with no mandate to take us out of the single market, landing us with tariffs on our most important export market and an economic shock that leaked Treasury documents yesterday put as high as 10% of GDP.

There are many ways to leave the EU. The result of the referendum does not give the Government carte blanche to choose the most damaging one. Surely we have not “taken back control” only to surrender it to the Prime Minister and her increasingly absurd three Brexiteers, while Parliament becomes a spectator? Surely it is only right that we start a national conversation about the best way forward for our country in these new circumstances? Surely we need a cross-party agreement on the best way forward, because the results of the Government’s decisions on how we leave will affect our prospects for generations to come. Who can argue against that, with the pound now trading at a 168-year low?

Worse still, the xenophobic noises coming out of Birmingham last week and the failure to reassure EU citizens who are living and working in the UK, or indeed UK citizens living and working in the EU, is causing needless anxiety and fear. The rise in racist and homophobic hate crimes in the aftermath of the vote is shaming our nation and besmirching our international reputation.

I offer some principles on the way forward, which are clear and pressing. I will mention here only a few. Workers should not pay the price of Brexit. The poorest and most vulnerable should not pay the price of Brexit. We welcome the Chancellor’s guarantees on existing EU funds, but we need more details of what is actually being protected. There is some £200 million of vital investment at risk in Merseyside alone. We should avoid a race to the bottom by guaranteeing that our worker and corporate regulations do not deliberately undercut EU standards, and maintaining goodwill and links with what will still be our largest market. We need to think ambitiously about what would constitute a modern industrial base that would allow us to compete in a changing world.

Mr MacNeil: The hon. Lady is reading out an admirable list. There is also another fantasy that is peddled on the Government Benches: that the UK, alone outside the single market, will get tariff-free access to the single market. If it were so easy to get tariff-free access to the single market, there would be a whole host of other countries with tariff-free access. They do not, they will not and they cannot, and Government Members are misleading the people with that.

Ms Eagle: I am afraid I agree with the hon. Gentleman’s analysis. He is right to make that point.

We also know that entrepreneurial activity—risk taking and creativity—will be crucial in driving Britain’s future success, alongside an active state that both rewards success and leaves no one behind. However, the uncertainty about our future trade arrangements in this context is extremely damaging, and it is damaging our interests now. We must ensure that the enormous globe-spanning corporations pay their fair share of taxes, so that we can invest in opportunities for all Britons. This will require increased global co-operation, not less. Britain must therefore be at the forefront of international institutions that set the rules by which business is done across our globe.
It is now imperative that the Government set out the tests against which any deal to leave the EU must be judged, because we have not heard them yet. How does our future relationship with Europe bolster and underpin a more activist national industrial strategy that delivers more jobs for the future and greater investment and growth in our economy? How will we heal the divisions in our country, which set city against town, young against old and communities against each other? How can we maintain and enhance the collective security of Britain and its allies and maintain the current co-operation that allows cross-border crime and terrorism to be thwarted and prosecuted? How can Britain remain an engaged and influential world power that has a seat at the table, setting the rules by which nations and corporations have to abide?

Leaving the EU is a complex process that will cause great damage if it is botched. This is a challenge that will require the Prime Minister to unite a divided nation. She cannot succeed locked in a room with a few advisers. She will need us all to play our part as Members of Parliament. She will need this place to play its part. She will need citizens to play their part, too, helping us to reassess from first principles who we are, who we want to be, how we can make our way in the world, how we can be prosperous and how we can achieve our ambitions. If she carries on as she has started, she will not succeed. It is not too late, though, for her to change course and approach. For the sake of my constituents in Wallasey and for all our constituents, I hope she does so.

4.32 pm

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle), who has grasped and conveyed the extent of the debate and discussion we are now in.

I am delighted to get the chance to speak. Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Nicky Morgan), I have had fewer occasions to speak about Europe over the years than I might have wished, following a very enjoyable ministerial career. I particularly missed not being able to say something in the Commons before the referendum. I would like now to put on record what I told my electors: that, contrary to popular opinion, I believe that this country prospered in the European Union, just as the others were always intact. I believe that we were enhanced by our membership of the European Union, just as the European Union was enhanced by our membership of it. With a political lifetime of relationships with colleagues in different European parties and different European countries, and remembering what they went through over the past century to build the European Union and all that it meant, I listened with despair and sometimes shame to the mischaracterisation of the EU and, for too long, to the drip-drip of poison from the lips of those who should have known a damn sight better. I did not get a chance to say that in the House before the referendum, but I say it now.

I do not want to concentrate on the detail in this debate. We have heard a lot about the detail of the negotiations that are going to come, and the House and the country are now getting a sense of just how complex they will be. Rather, I want to concentrate on why the process that is set out in the Opposition motion, agreed to and enhanced by the rider offered by the Government, is so important.

The context of the referendum is different from the context of a general election. We were not looking at delivering a complete manifesto, which a political party is elected on and then must defend to the death. The people made a decision. Neither the Government nor the Opposition won, but we must collectively put into practice what the people told us to do. I, like others, accept the decision of 23 June. My role on behalf of my constituents is to make it work.

One thing was clearly revealed to us during the referendum campaign: a disdain among the public for the political process, in the main. People said how they felt excluded by the process. They did not like the campaign, because it exaggerated in all cases what could or could not be done; people thought that both sides told downright lies in order to enhance their case. It was not our finest hour, and that fitted with the people’s view of how they think this place, party politics and Westminster work.

The referendum gives us an opportunity to do things differently because we have an opportunity to engage the people in a different way. If we carry on in the same old way, we will not take the people with us, and we will not be able to build a consensus of the 52% and 48% as we look towards a new future. If it is the same old story, the public will still feel removed from us.

We have made a good start today. The natural inclination of any Government is to reject an Opposition motion outright, but they did not do so, to great credit. There is a listening exercise going on, but we need to go on from there, and I believe Select Committees have a great role to play. Let us bring people in front of our Select Committees to explain in detail what they think about the process to come, because they are affected. As I said to the Secretary of State the other day, what I most want is a process in which what we hear from people who are affected has some influence on the path taken by the Government. That is what engagement with this place needs.

What sort of things might be considered? I met Peter Kendall of the National Farmers Union, who was very concerned about not just agriculture but welfare and the environment—they are all wrapped up together. When people come before Select Committees or the House in a way that is not party political, and there is an authority that has been gained over recent years, that will matter to the public, because they will feel that it represents more of their voice and more of the truth.

There is a tone that the outside world and Parliament can bring to the negotiations. I, too, bitterly resent the way in which this has been characterised as adversarial, “us versus them” and “we have got to win”. To make a small point, does anybody not believe that those sitting around the negotiating table with the United Kingdom have their own interests as well, and will fight for them? The argument over whether we should stay in the EU was not just about economics; it was about politics, our sovereignty and taking back control. Do we not think that Chancellor Merkel and President Hollande also have political reasons for believing that the European Union needs to be protected in some way from the poor or adverse effect that Brexit might have, and that they
will put those views forward as well? It is not all about us. Those from outside can bring that view to us.

If we can bring people together and give the public a sense that we are not doing business as usual, but are being more co-operative and more consensual here as we drive things forward, both we and the political process will have gained hugely by showing that it is not the same old story.

4.39 pm

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Between the date of the referendum and the start of the Conservative party conference, not a lot was clear about the Government's intentions. There were various statements from the three Brexiteer Ministers, and they were slapped down one by one over either the customs union, the single market or the timing of the invoking of article 50. However, that lack of clarity changed at the Conservative party conference. One thing became clear: the Government had decided that limiting immigration from elsewhere in the European Union must be the driver of everything else. That is their overriding priority as they approach the negotiations. All other considerations, be they economic, security-related, trade-related or in any other field, must take second place.

The Government's policy is immigration first, economics and everything else second, and the markets have expressed their views on that priority. The pound is plummeting; its slide began with the referendum result, and has been sharpened since the Conservative party conference. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Ms Eagle), there are reports that it is now trading at a 168-year low; and the nonchalant attitude of Ministers to that is woefully complacent.

A recent newspaper article quoted the Prime Minister's description of her modus operandi, which was as follows:

"I don't just make an instant decision. I look at the evidence, take the advice, consider it properly and then come to a decision."

Perhaps, when he sums up the debate, the Minister will tell us what economic assessment was made for the stance taken by the Prime Minister and other Cabinet members at the party conference. What impact will this hard Brexit have outside the single market and the customs union? What impact will it have on our manufacturing industry, our financial services or our agriculture? What impact will it have on the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic? What were the papers of which the Prime Minister spoke? What was this careful process? Is not the truth that there was no process at all? There was no looking at the evidence, no taking advice, and no considering it properly. Instead, a desire for headlines and for appeasing the hard Brexiteers in the Prime Minister's own party took priority over the national interest.

Let me now deal with the substance of the motion. The 170 questions published today by my Front-Bench colleagues are entirely legitimate questions to ask on behalf of our constituents. The public have a right to know about our future trading arrangements, security arrangements, border arrangements, and so on. The Government cannot shut down legitimate questioning of their policy by proclaiming that anyone who questions their direction or intent is trying to deny the result of the referendum. That is simply not the case. The sight of these erstwhile champions of parliamentary sovereignty desperately pleading that the Executive now be given a blank cheque for anything that they want to do may be amusing on one level, but it will not hold in terms of how this process will be conducted.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I am glad. I have heard the mantra repeated again and again: despite having voted to remain, Members accept the will of the electorate. But when the mask slips, as it did during the speech of my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry)—

Alistair Burt: She is entitled to her view.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Of course she is entitled to her view, but when that mask slipped, it was cheered on the other side. Do those Members really accept the will of the voters, or is this actually a ruse to thwart Brexit?

Mr McFadden: The attempt by the right hon. Gentleman and others to shut down questioning of the Government's intentions is simply an attempt to shut down discussion and scrutiny, and it will not stand. Let us ask ourselves for a moment what would have happened if the result had been the other way round. What if it had been 52% to 48% in favour of remaining? Do we seriously think that the Members who supported a leave vote would have stopped asking questions about the Government's EU policy, and would have said that all future decisions relating to the EU were purely a matter for the Executive? No, they would not, and such a proposition is totally absurd. I welcome the Government's partial climbdown in the amendment, but Ministers must realise that Members on this side will keep pressing for the facts, for discussion, and for a parliamentary say in the terms of Brexit itself.

I want to make one more point. It is reported that, in another context, the former United States Secretary of State Colin Powell once said, "If you break it, you've bought it". That is sometimes referred to as the Pottery Barn rule. Well, those who led the leave campaign, many of whom are now Ministers in the Government, should remember that phrase, because what has been broken is our membership of the European Union, and they now own the consequences. They own the drop in the pound. When a great company such as Nissan says that it will suspend investment, they own that suspension. They own the promises, such as the promise of £350 million extra for the NHS, which will not be forgotten or set aside. That phrase, "If you break it, you've bought it", is not just a phrase for today's debate. It will ring through every decision and every consequence in the years ahead.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am afraid that the limit on Back-Bench speeches has to be reduced to four minutes with immediate effect. The first person to be subject to that limit, the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles), has had notice of the change.

4.46 pm

Nick Boles (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): Mr Speaker, I just hope that you did not reduce the time limit simply because you saw me standing up eagerly hoping to speak.
This is my first speech from the Back Benches since leaving the Government, and I rise to contribute to what has been a good and interesting debate. I am pleased that the Government’s amendment makes it clear that they have no intention or desire to stop the House of Commons discussing the nature of our future relationship with the European Union. It would be absurd for any Government to try to deny the House that opportunity, and it is clear that this Government have no intention of doing so. Indeed, I wonder whether the Secretary of State, who is not in his place, is ever going to have time to actually do any negotiating, given that he seems to spend so much time in this House and in the other place.

I wish to offer the House a particular perspective on this matter. I note that it is shared by 70% of the loyal Opposition. I campaigned energetically and with conviction for remain, but I represent a constituency that voted very heavily to leave the European Union. I say gently to others in my position that it is not good enough simply to say that they accept and respect the result. Do they understand the result? Have they sought to examine why their constituents were led to reject their advice? Why did my constituents reject my advice? Why did our constituents reject the advice of all the party leaders except the leader of the United Kingdom Independence party, who fortunately never managed to make it into this place? I am afraid it is not good enough to persist in expressing all the views that we previously held and to carry on with that same argument as though nothing had changed.

The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who is in the same position as I am, rather appropriately cited the classic Burke line that we all like to use. I do not know the exact words, but he suggested that we owe the people not an automatic response but our judgment—he used the word “conscience”, but I think Burke used the word “judgment”—and that we would be doing our constituents a disservice if we did otherwise. That is right, of course, and we all like to hide behind that proposition. I think Burke is right when it comes to moral issues, but I am not sure if he is right when it comes to huge issues relating to our national strategic, economic and political arrangements. The fact that nearly 70% of my constituents voted to leave the European Union, despite a campaign that aired all the issues exhaustively and exhaustingly, means that I need to change my views about some of the arrangements that we enter into in order to secure our goals.

That leads me to my second point. When we start the process of scrutiny, please can we start by talking about ends, not means? I too want an immigration system that provides people from all around the world to come and support British industry and help it compete. However, the single market and freedom of movement are not the only way of achieving those outcomes. We need to open our minds to different processes that can lead to the ends we all seek.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab): This afternoon has shown that there are still some very sore feelings on both sides of the argument, and that we are slowly moving towards overcoming the hurt, and in some cases bitterness, over what has happened. I recommend to everyone the speech by the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), not just because of what he said, but because of the tone in which he delivered it. As the suffragettes would have said, “It is not just words, but deeds.” It is all very well to say, “Now we must all be very friendly together,” but we must deliver it in a tone that recognises there is still a lot of healing to be done. That was also clear in the speech by the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles).

I want us to move on to a point where we can start to look beyond the process and at some of the policies. We need to get to a point where there are elements of agreement about what the vote to leave meant. In the context of language, I rather regret that we ended up with the term Brexit. It was a vote to leave. It was a vote to have control of our laws, our taxes and our borders. It was a vote to be able to hold those who make decisions on those three areas accountable and, most importantly, to be able to remove them if we disagree with them. Of course, we all talk to our voters.

I want to raise two things. The first is an initiative that was started today by Change Britain, an organisation that I chair, called “Welcome to stay”. It asks people to sign up to the basic principle that EU citizens who are here have rights. We should recognise those rights as soon as possible and ensure that we continue to be an open, outward-looking and welcoming country. That is important not just for the United Kingdom; it is equally important for UK citizens living in the rest of Europe. The sooner we establish that principle, the better it will be. It will establish a tone for the continuing debate.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need to clarify the situation for those who might want to invest or to live here in the next two years? I heard today of a contract that has been lost in my constituency because a German national was going to invest, but is now uncertain about where he will be and what his status will be in two years’ time.

Ms Stuart: My hon. Friend is right that overcoming uncertainty must be a priority, but if I had to choose what should come first, I think that people’s status and ability to plan is more important, and that we should then talk about trade arrangements. However, she is right that we have to get the best deal for this country.

Over the past few weeks, I have not only talked to constituents, but gone out with Change Britain and talked to a lot of people across the country. On the subject of immigration, which was so significant and important, what came out of the focus groups was a belief that democracy means that people have a say on what the rules are. People wanted those rules to be fair and to apply equally to everyone from outside the United Kingdom, whether they are in the EU or not. Those in working-class communities, many of them Labour voters, who voted in significant numbers to leave, said that politicians should deliver on their promises.
A particular challenge for Labour is that if our constituencies voted one way and our party's position was another, we really should not be going around saying, “Anything bad that happens from now on is the fault of your decision.”

This is a moment when all of us should spend a lot of time listening to what people have said. The referendum has shown us two things. The first is that we need to revisit the basis on which we fight referendums and how they fit in with our parliamentary processes, but let us park that one. The second is a deep disillusionment with the political processes. Those will not be healed by a friendly, or sometimes not so friendly, banter across these Benches. They will be healed only if we start to go out in a non-partisan way, listen to what people are saying in a non-judgmental way and then respond, particularly in those areas that feel they have been left behind. I think we have started to take the first step in that process today, but we must recognise that it is only the first step. When we talk about seeking consensus, there is a responsibility on both sides to try to achieve that. If we want to put the national interest first, we must start by showing it in here, that the nation matters more.

4.55 pm

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): It has struck me often during this debate, Mr Speaker, that you are chairing a group therapy session. There are many, many ranges of response to the referendum of 23 June. We have the five stages of grief: some people are still in denial; some people feel very angry; others are in the bargaining stage; not a few are depressed; and a large number accept the result. We all need to accept this result and to move on.

The Prime Minister said that Brexit means Brexit, which is a palpably obvious tautology. It means that we know what it does not mean. We know that it means that we are leaving the EU and that Britain is not continuing its relationship with the EU—the basis of which formed the architecture of the EU, which has lasted for 43 years. Things have to change, and they will change. With a full debate and the full scrutiny of this House, we will reach a conclusion that will put us in a different place. We have respected our constituents, as my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) has suggested. We have listened, absorbed and moved on, and things have changed.

There are many different strands of opinion on the single market. It was said again and again by the previous Prime Minister and the previous Chancellor that if we were to vote to leave on 23 June—this was part of their argument—we would have to leave the single market. I accept that that is still open for discussion, but it was very clear to me and to millions of people that the single market was, in effect, one of the silver bullets of the remain case. Those campaigners used “Project Fear”. They said that house prices in London would go down 20%. One or two even suggested that we would not have Europeans in our premier league. All sorts of claims and allegations were made, many of which were proved false.

Interestingly, I have never seen Labour Members so keenly following the stock market and the currency markets—I regard the fact that they are doing so now as an encouraging development. Ahead of the vote, they said that the stock market would crash. The day after the result, the stock market did fall, and they said, “There you are, the stock market has fallen.” Now they are saying, “Well, the stock market has gone up because the currency has gone down, so therefore we were right.” They cannot argue it both ways.

Finally, let me throw out this thought: the single market has now become the last redoubt—the last bastion—of the remain campaigners. The first outer walls have been stormed, and now they are retreating to this totem of the single market. They should examine what the single market is. There is this absurd delusion that, somehow, retaining access to the single market means that we have to be in the single market. Yet we know that most countries in the world have plentiful access to the market, but they are not members of the market. It is not a binary thing, just as it is not a binary thing to say that we want to control immigration, but not to end it. These are false oppositions that are endlessly being rehearsed. I am afraid that they demean the debate by obscuring what should be clear points that we are all making on behalf of our constituents and on behalf of this country.

4.59 pm

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I have often thought about the lessons we in the Scottish National party can learn from this referendum and the referendum in Scotland of two years ago. If some hon. Members find themselves in a confusing position, they should think how we feel. We are on both the winning and the losing sides of this referendum, because, of course, we won the argument in Scotland, where we did our campaigning, but the UK-wide vote was to leave. Yes, I do indeed accept that the UK’s vote was to leave, but politics in Scotland is raw, as hon. Members will know. If the House put even a smidgen of the effort that it has put into political healing this afternoon into the Scottish political debate, we would have much better politics and political debate across these islands. Instead, any time independence is mentioned, we are constantly told, “You voted to stay in the UK. Back in your box and be quiet”, and so that seems to continue here just now.

Before 23 June, many people were told that it was time to take their country back, to vote to leave and to take back control. I remember coming to London on the Sunday after the referendum, passing through Parliament square and seeing a sign held up by someone who had voted to remain that said, “I want my country back.” That is how many of us still feel. Part of the problem is that the leave side has not thought about how to own its victory. That was evidenced in the campaign, and I do not claim by any means that the remain side was perfect—far from it—and it is evidenced here today as well.

The right hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart) is right: we have started to see the process of political healing here this afternoon, but it needs to go further. If we continue with this boundary of us versus them, as we see in the Daily Mail today—the “remoaners”, as we are sometimes called, which is rather ironic from a newspaper that has done nothing but moan about the European Union for 40 years—we will not move forward. The politics of grievance and confusion will set in, and that is a threat to community cohesion, to our economy and to our international standing in the world.
It is the responsibility of all Members to ask questions, to scrutinise the Government’s plans and, indeed, to inform them. “Brexit means Brexit” was enough to get the Prime Minister through her coronation and her summer, but that has gone now. We need to see some meat on the bone. There is no point in replacing one political project—the EU, which many Members felt was something that was done to them, rather than including them—with a Brexit process that will equally be something done to people, as opposed to including them.

Hon. Members might think that it is my job, as an SNP Member, to undermine this place as much as possible. I do not come here with any secret agenda to try to block the vote, as has been suggested, and to try to thwart the Government’s ability to negotiate on our behalf. My party and, indeed, all Members want to see a successful negotiation with the other EU member states. Irrespective of where constitutional politics in Scotland goes over the coming time—I have my views on that, as Members would expect—we want to see a successful rest of the UK as well. That is in all our interests. We have started to move in the right direction. I only hope that Government Members will keep that up, as we move forward.

5.3 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): This has been an impassioned debate, with a great deal of hyperbole at times on both sides, but we should not forget that the Opposition motion is about scrutiny—a principle that has been explicitly accepted by the Government in their amendment, and we should welcome that.

There is an arrogance creeping into the debate today that we should take great care about, because only one certainty is coming from the referendum decision in June: the vote to leave the EU—I put it on record that I was a remainer—and nothing else is certain at this point. Members on both sides have advocated membership of or freedom to trade in the single market, freedom of movement, or no freedom of movement. Our EU partners listening today may be forgiven for thinking that there is more than a touch of arrogance coming from the British Parliament, but the truth is that it is all up for grabs, and it is not for us to determine the outcome at this stage. We may well continue trading in the single market—I certainly hope so—but that is what this negotiation is all about.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) said “Get real”, and I think that we should, but for slightly different reasons. Why should those who remain in the EU reward members who choose to leave? We do need to get real. We are leaving the biggest trading bloc in the world. The members of that trading bloc want to continue to sell their goods to us, and we want to sell ours to them, but that will come with some sort of price, or issues, attached. We can romanticise this all we want, but at the end of the day, it will come down to hard economic facts and the capability of the Ministers sitting on the Front Bench today.

[Interruption.] I think we should get behind them and show a little bit more support; perhaps then we could show the united front that we should.
Wales, where there is not much of a rental market for people at that level, will think it is an option to move to this country.

Secondly, the company is passionate about us staying in the single market, as members of the single market, because it wants full access, as members, to all the organisations that establish the technical standards for the things that it makes. Otherwise, the company is absolutely certain that the Germans, French and Italians will make sure that those things are made in the way that German, French and Italian companies make them, and that we do not. They are anxious because, if this goes wrong, they will simply have to move all their business to Germany to continue growing the company. That will be an enormous loss to the local economy.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I very much agree with the points that my hon. Friend is making. Is it not also the case that manufacturing of that kind is integrated across the EU, with an EU integrated supply chain? If the UK is not part of that, that is another reason why a lot of jobs will be lost.

Chris Bryant: That is an extremely good point. It is often Europe that enables people to think of opportunities in the UK because of cross-border co-operation on education and research skills.

I would like to come on to the process. The Government have to take the 48% with them. It will not be good enough if, when we leave at the end of the process it is still only 52% of people who think that we have made the right decision. That will be a recipe for disaster and lack of confidence in this country. I would also say to the Government that I have never believed royal prerogative to be absolute. We have fought wars—quite a lot of wars—about this. Even on the question of going to war, the royal prerogative barely exists any more. One could argue that, after the war of American independence, when Parliament, rather than the Government, decided to stop fighting the war, we abandoned the royal prerogative on war-making powers on 22 February 1782. In recent years, it has become absolutely established that we do not send troops to war, except in extreme situations, without the permission and say-so of Parliament. Mr Cameron and William Hague explicitly agreed as much when they lost the vote on Syria in the House and decided not to proceed with the action they had intended to take.

Prerogative is not absolute in relation to war, and it is certainly not absolute in relation to treaty making. The 1713 treaty of Utrecht had to go through Parliament, and only got through the House of Lords because Queen Anne was persuaded to introduce 12 more Members of the House of Lords. The Government are rapidly increasing the number of Members of the House of Lords, but I hope that they do not do that.

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Gentleman is widely acknowledged as a capable historian, so he will know that treaties, under any kind of Lockean or mixed constitutional thinking, were always matters of federative powers.

Chris Bryant: That is completely wrong. I am afraid. The hon. Gentleman, too, is an historian, and doubtless an impressive one: I have never got round to reading any of his books, but I am sure that in my present retirement I will have an opportunity to do so. Under the Ponsonby rule of 1924 it is absolutely clear that all treaties are laid before both Houses, and if either House votes down a treaty, the Government will not proceed. I do not think that even in relation to treaties, the Government’s argument stands.

On timing, the Government seem to anticipate that we will leave the EU, at the very latest, on 1 April 2019. Let us work backwards from that date. Any new domestic legislation resulting from the negotiations would require Royal Assent at least six months before so that it could be implemented in law around the country. That means that a treaty Bill implementing the negotiations would have to be introduced in the Commons or the other place at least 12 months before 1 April 2019 on 1 April 2018, which would fall in the previous Session. I do not think that the Lords would like such a Bill to be carried over, so we may well have to have a two-year Session running through 2017 and 2018.

Finally, I will die trying to persuade people that we would be better off in the European Union, but that does not mean that I intend to stand in the way of the will of the British people.
its approval. I am bound to point out that it was Parliament that decided on the referendum, not the Executive. It is our task to honour its terms, even if it is the Executive’s task to implement the negotiating process.

I also worry very much about the excessive euphoria that has followed this process. I hope that I am not too gloomy, but I see it as fraud with risk. There is the risk of the economic damage, as was commented upon by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke)—I will not pursue that now. I have to say that, as a lawyer, I see the repeal process and our leaving as a legal nightmare, and one that will take up an endless amount of the House’s time, to the prejudice of many other priorities on which we should be focused. It undoubtedly impinges on the devolution settlements and competence. We have a duty to maintain legal certainty and the rule of law, which will be jeopardised in the process. There are private legal rights that are likely to be affected, some of which might lead to litigation and claims for compensation. Our international legal obligations are engaged, particularly with the Irish Republic, and that is a matter of vital national interest.

Surrounding all that is the fact of the risk of this process being exploited by other countries with interests inimical to those of the United Kingdom, ranging from Russia, which is a predatory state and an international disturber, to the Spanish attitude to Gibraltar, which is also capable of operating greatly to our prejudice and theirs. These are all matters that we will have to discuss.

5.18 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): Like many other Members, I am profoundly worried about the lack of clarity from the Government. Even though we all accept that we are talking only about the principles that will govern negotiations in future, this is a momentous decision and really the House needs to understand and debate the principles that lie behind the actions before us.

I wish to make two specific points. First, it seems pretty clear that the negotiations will not have been concluded within the two years stipulated under article 50, and therefore we will have the great repeal Act. The Brexit Minister told me on Monday that “the great repeal Bill will put the acquis communautaire straight into British law”—[Official Report, 10 October 2016; Vol. 613, c. 66.]

The implications are considerable, because Britain will not have concluded its negotiations and, even though we will have left the European Union, European law will still apply to us. The implications are huge. For example, if we are no longer under the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, will British courts adjudicate on British courts? How on earth would that work in the European Court of Justice, will British courts adjudicate on British courts? How on earth would that work in the European Court of Justice?

My second question is about how long that situation will apply for—how long will European law continue to apply even though we have left the European Union? Is there an open time scale?

I also want to address the effect on Wales. Like other parts of the United Kingdom, Wales has a devolved Administration and we receive significant amounts of European funds: £1.8 billion from structural funds, mainly focused on west Wales and the valleys, covering the funding period 2014 to 2020. The Government have said that they will ensure that the moneys allocated will still be forthcoming until 2020, but my question is about the fact that the Government have also said they intend to change the priorities for spending that money even though there is a partnership agreement between the European Union and the Welsh Government about how the money is to be spent. [ Interruption. ] The Under-Secretary of State looks quizzical, but the Secretary of State for Wales gave that explicit commitment only the other day.

Given the large sums involved, is it not right and morally justified, as well as being a legal certainty, that the devolved Administrations must have a direct say on the negotiations and final conclusions to be reached? Those sums of money are important to the peripheral parts of the United Kingdom. Also important is the fact that when the negotiations have concluded and significant powers have been repatriated from Brussels, many of those powers will then be devolved to Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland as part of the devolution package. It is only reasonable that the full implications of that change are understood, debated and agreed by the devolved institutions themselves. I would like a commitment from the Government that that will be the case.

I come to my final point. I do not think anybody in the House seriously doubts that a clear decision has been taken by the British people. But we want to be absolutely certain that what follows that decision is not harmful to the best interests of the British people. That is what we are concerned about and why it is so important that Parliament should exercise full scrutiny.

5.22 pm

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): First, I acknowledge the result and accept that its consequence is that Britain will leave the European Union, as I would have expected people to have done back in 1975 when we last had a referendum on this subject. My second point is that it is really critical to recognise that a binary decision of this nature opens up so many issues, and we have to think carefully about them all. I am going to list a few.

Obviously, one issue is the economy. We must think of some tests to have in our minds over the next two or so years about the value of our pound, the development of our trade, the trends in foreign direct investment, employment characteristics and so on. If we do not have such tests, we will lose sight of a fundamental point: back in June the electorate did not vote to become poorer. They are expecting something different.

The problem is that the clarion calls of hope and confidence that we have heard today, combined with the sense that there is a horizon over there that we will get to, will simply not be enough in terms of setting out our future. We have to think carefully about the detail. As anyone connected with the European Scrutiny Committee should know, we have been listening to detail about what happens in the European Union for years. It cannot be surprising that there must be detail as we leave the European Union. That point needs really to be taken on board.

The question of the single market is imperative. It is all very well saying, “Oh well, we’re going to leave the European Union, so we will leave the single market,”
but to leave the world’s freest trade area without rhyme or reason will be verging on an act of national self-harm unless we have some alternative. We have to understand the importance of that issue.

How do we scrutinise? Back in the early 1990s, the Maastricht treaty was thoroughly scrutinised—not by a portion of Parliament, but by the whole of Parliament; various Members who now suggest that we might not want to scrutinise things terribly much were at the forefront of that scrutiny in the 1990s. We should remember that.

Seema Malhotra: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the way in which we deal with the single market is fundamental for a very different reason? It is about not just the sale of goods, but the development and production of goods, as outlined in some earlier speeches, because our economies are far more connected in terms of the production of goods.

Neil Carmichael: Absolutely right. I have talked many times in this Chamber about the importance of free movement and the importance of the single market in connection with supply chains, investment and so on. That is central to the single market argument.

That reminds me of an important point made earlier: we have to make sure that we have some friends in the world so that we can deal with them later. We face risks—with Russia and other nation states—and it is imperative to make sure we are friendly with the remaining 27 member states of the European Union post-Brexit. The way in which we conduct ourselves is absolutely essential to building up those friendships and to making sure those bridges are protected and, indeed, strengthened, and, my goodness, we will need them.

This issue is also about something my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) correctly pointed out: we have to think about bringing people together; we have to think about what kind of nation we are creating post-Brexit and how we are going to present ourselves to the world, because we are engaged not just in an internal argument but an external process, and it involves not just Europe but the rest of the world. If we end up being reliant on the World Trade Organisation, 163 nation states will be able to say, “Aha, we might not let them in.” We are busy criticising one or two of those nation states right now, so we need to think carefully about our relationships with some of them.

As regards Select Committees, the Education Committee will be doing a full-scale inquiry into the consequences of Brexit on the university sector, picking up some of the points we have heard about skills. One reason the referendum went the way it did was that we have a mismatch between the skills we have produced and the skills we need. That is one of the things my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) was referring to when he talked about why we lost, and we must learn from those reasons and make sure that all our Select Committees play their part.

5.27 pm

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I very much agree with what the hon. Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael) has just said about the existential risks ahead for the UK economy.

A number of speakers in this very helpful, valuable debate have suggested that the negotiations should aim, on the one hand, for barrier-free access to the single market, to use the Secretary of State’s phrase, and, on the other, for us to no longer apply the current free movement rules in terms of people coming into the UK. I agree with that; that is the objective we should be setting. I hope that it will be set out and developed and that we will have the chance to vote on it before article 50 is invoked.

A number of us took part in an all-party visit to Germany last month. My hon. Friends the Members for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) and for Scunthorpe (Nic Dakin) were there; the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) was also there from the Conservative Benches and the leave campaign. We met businesses, politicians and civil servants, and they all wanted to talk to us about Britain’s departure from the EU. They told us they were great admirers of Britain. They said Germany would be Britain’s best ally in the EU as the negotiations go forward. They were very sorry that we are leaving, but they accepted that we are.

We said to them, “If the British Government come to Brussels and ask for barrier-free access to the single market and to no longer apply free movement, would Germany argue for that settlement?” and they said, “No, Germany wouldn’t.” The reason is that to do so would be to invite many other European countries that do not like some bit or other of the four pillars of the European Union also to come forward with requests to opt out of those bits. The result would be an unwinding of the European Union, which would not be in the interests of Germany or German manufacturers. That is why the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood) is wrong to suggest that because lots of German cars are sold to the UK, we will readily get barrier-free access to the single market. I do not think we will. It will be a difficult negotiation.

For much of our discussion in Germany, it was very difficult to see any glimmer of a resolution that would allow us to continue to trade in the way we do. Finally, however, we had a meeting with Dr Markus Kerber, the director general of the BDI—the Federation of German Industries, the equivalent of the CBI—who suggested the possibility that we might be able to redefine free movement so that it applies only to people with a contract of employment in the UK or something very close to that. Arguably, that is what free movement has always meant. It is supposed to be free movement of labour, not the free movement of just anybody.

Dr Markus Kerber suggested that it might be possible to persuade the other EU member states to change the meaning of free movement in that way—that pillar among the four pillars would remain in place, but it would mean something rather different for the UK—and, if that was done, to negotiate barrier-free access to the single market. The idea would clearly need a great deal of work, but it may at least be a glimmer of something that could be delivered to avoid what otherwise seem to me to be very serious threats for the future of the UK economy.

Manufacturing across Europe is integrated—aerospace, cars—so if, as the right hon. Member for Wokingham suggested, we start to impose tariffs on sub-assemblies made in another country before they come to the UK to be turned into cars, that would be an impossible position...
for manufacturers, and it would pose great risks for financial services as well. I hope that that might be a way forward for Ministers to consider.

5.31 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): It is a great honour to follow the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), who, as usual, made an extremely impressive speech. I agree with every word he said.

Two opportunities, which have already been mentioned, will come out of this process. The first opportunity is about the tone with which we conduct it. Most of the speeches today have very much had a constructive tone. I agree with the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) that we should adopt the same constructive tone in talking about Scotland, because that is a much better approach than the one that some of us have used in the past. My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael) said that we have to create excellent relationships with our European Union partners and to build on the relationships we have already, and that is absolutely vital.

The second opportunity, in a world where there is a great threat to the global economy, was mentioned to me when I was in Washington for meetings of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund last week. The meetings last week were the most downbeat that I have attended for a long time—not just about Brexit, but about the downturn in the Chinese economy and many other factors. We have the opportunity to make this process a chance to stress the importance of interacting with the world in praise, as it were, of globalisation—I do not like that word—or internationalisation by working to encourage trade and reduce barriers. This is an opportunity. We could shirk it and retreat, or we could use it to show that we want to be positive and to reach out.

I want to make a couple of comments about content. I know that this debate is about scrutiny, but content is equally important because we do not have much time—next March is less than six months away. In addition to agreeing with the right hon. Member for East Ham and other hon. Members about having the fullest possible access and, if possible, being part of the single market, I will mention two points from my long experience of selling into the EU from outside it over more than two decades.

First, this is not just about tariff barriers, because non-tariff barriers are sometimes worse than tariff barriers. We could have tariff-free access and then find that all our cars have to be exported through a small port that does not have the capacity to import them. We must watch out for that.

Secondly, as a number of Members have mentioned and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) raised in the context of Jaguar Land Rover, there is the issue of supply chains. They are absolutely vital for aerospace and for car manufacturing, and we must make sure that they are not impeded by paperwork, tariffs or whatever. That must be absolutely at the forefront of negotiations.

Finally, it is absolutely right that we focus a lot on manufacturing, but services are critical. They are well over 80% of our economy. We have a surplus in exports of services to the European Union. We must absolutely focus on ensuring that we have the best possible environment both for exporting services and for engaging in providing them throughout the European Union and elsewhere.

5.35 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I rise to speak in defence of free movement of people and to ask the Government why they are so recklessly forgetting any consideration of what it brings and casting it aside. I want in particular to ask them to consider the impact of that on whether we can be part of the single European market.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), I will be a remaineer till I die. I passionately believe in the value that being part of the European Union, with all its flaws but also all its many benefits, brings to us. I was also particularly inspired to hear the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) speak so passionately and eloquently in favour of free movement of people.

In Bristol West people voted overwhelmingly for remain—it was close to 80%. Those people have asked me to speak, on their behalf, for hanging on for as long as we possibly can to everything that is good about the European Union. They have particularly asked me to speak out in favour of free movement of people. Before I say anything further, I want to say something to all those EU citizens living and working in and contributing to the life of Bristol, in the health service, the hospitals, the universities and our tech and creative industries—not displacing British people from jobs, but sharing their knowledge, transferring their skills and working in a reciprocal way, as UK citizens travel to the European Union and share their skills, I say to all the EU citizens in Bristol, we welcome you, we value you and we want you to stay. I believe that many others feel the same way about EU citizens in their constituencies.

The risks of giving up free movement of people are profound. I want to speak briefly about the benefits of free movement. Free movement of people has been presented as something done to us, instead of something about which we also have options and in which we also participate. Which of us does not want our sons and daughters, and our nephews and nieces, to have the choice of whether to live, work or study in or travel around the European Union? So many young people—70% to 80%—voted for remain. I think also of the 16 and 17-year-olds who were denied the right to vote in the referendum by the Government. They have told me that they feel betrayed by the older generation and robbed of opportunities. I think of the apprentices at Airbus, who at the moment can move between different aerospace industry sites across Europe. And I think of the musicians who can currently tour around the European Union. Will they be required to have separate visas for each of the 27 countries? Will there be separate entry regulations for all their equipment?

The risks for us of giving up free movement of people are profound. Tech industries, the university and the creative industries in my constituency have told me that they are already being cut out of applications to the Horizon 2020 research and development fund. That is no small matter. It is about not just money, but knowledge, improving our economy, our future and jobs.
If the Government want to jettison all of that, the Secretary of State should at least have had the courtesy to inform the British people what they were risking. The Government should respect the sovereignty of this Parliament, which Brexit campaigners made so much of. Does the Secretary of State really want to throw all that away? It is clear to me that they have no plan for the future of this country, and if they throw it all away, without debate, without proper scrutiny and without the full participation of the British people, my constituents and the country will never forgive them.

5.39 pm

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Parliament must have a role, whether through Select Committees or in the Chamber, in the general terms of the negotiations. That is why I will support the motion this evening and why I welcome the principles laid out by the Secretary of State this afternoon. However, it would clearly be counterproductive to restrict the Government’s scope to negotiate the best deal for Britain.

If we attempt to set a form of specific mandate, we will find ourselves choosing between two equally unattractive outcomes. The Government could do what Tony Blair did in 2004 ahead of the European constitution negotiations and set out a series of so-called red lines that are either so vague as to be meaningless or so much part of the consensus that they are unlikely to be challenged. Alternatively, they could set out something more detailed on what the UK would and would not accept, and risk destroying our negotiating position.

The negotiations are not a matter of simple, binary options for us to choose between, such as hard Brexit or soft Brexit, being in the internal market or having no access to it; or having open borders or sealed borders. They may be easy slogans, but they mean very little. Brexit means exactly what was on the ballot paper in June: Britain will not remain a member of the European Union.

Everybody, including many of the speakers this afternoon, seem to have a different idea of what they mean, particularly when it comes to the single market. We have heard a number of Labour Back Benchers say that we must remain members of the internal market. The shadow Brexit Secretary spoke of having access to the single market and the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) focused more on zero tariffs, particularly for manufactured goods. I spent seven years working in the European Parliament, mostly on internal market policy, but I do not recognise the distinct, clearly defined single market that we are being asked to stay in. If remaining in the single market means Britain remaining within the EEA as it is currently set up, it is hard to see how that is compatible with the tone of last summer’s debate or the vote in June. The internal market is the four freedoms of movement. Countries can no more be members of the internal market without freedom of movement than someone can take a pound of flesh without shedding a jot of blood.

If not that, what does single market access mean? Does it mean the ability to trade with EU countries? If so, presumably almost every country in the world has access. Does it mean zero tariffs, as the hon. Gentleman suggested? If so, that can and should be done. Trade barriers damage everybody. Does it mean people being able to provide a service in any EU country on the same basis as they can provide it in their home country? Ten years on from the EU services directive, the EU does not have that yet. I hope the Government address that in new agreements with the EU and countries outside it.

Britain should be an open trading nation. I believe we can make a success of that outside the EU. Of course Parliament has a role in scrutinising what comes next, but we should be clear that Britain will leave the EU and that we will be successful.

5.43 pm

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): There have been many passionate speeches about Parliament’s role in holding the Government to account for their Brexit decisions in the months and years ahead, but we must also focus on the here and now. This morning, the Bank of England released data showing that sterling has reached an historic 168-year low. The pound is now worth less than it was in the 1976 sterling crisis when the International Monetary Fund had to bail us out; in the aftermath of black Wednesday, when sterling left the exchange rate mechanism; and at the height of the financial crisis in 2008.

Sterling goes up and down, and foreign exchange markets are not always the most reliable measure of what is happening in our economy, but when currency markets move so sharply and for a significant period, the Government should pay attention, yet so far Ministers have not. The pound has fallen by around 20% over the past year. About half of that happened well after the referendum result as the Government’s position on Brexit began to take shape. The moves in the currency markets are backed by billions of dollars. The markets are saying that UK domestic assets look less valuable; that the UK seems to be a less attractive country in which to invest; and that the UK’s growth prospects look set to be weaker.

The fall in sterling matters to every single household in the UK. It is not just that foreign holidays are more expensive; it is that the costs of everyday goods that are made abroad, such as fuel, food and clothes, are rising too. British households are more dependent on imports than before, with imports now representing about 30% of our GDP. The pound in people’s pockets has been devalued. If prices rise faster than wages, people will be poorer.

It may be that a devaluation in sterling will make our exports more competitive. If exports rise and imports fall, our large trade deficit could decrease, helping to rebalance our economy. However, this has not happened after previous sterling crises, at least not on a lasting basis. An improvement in Britain’s trade position may be even harder to achieve now if Brexit reduces access to the EU single market and alternative export markets take years to open up.

There is another important consequence of the falling pound, which has so far received far too little attention. In her recent party conference speech, the Prime Minister said that while monetary policy has provided “the necessary emergency medicine after the financial crisis,” super-low interest rates and quantitative easing “have had some bad side-effects”. People with assets have become richer, but those without have suffered. People with mortgages have found their debts are cheaper, but those with savings have found
themselves poorer. What the Prime Minister has failed to recognise is that the falling pound is yet again benefiting the asset-rich. Shareholders in FTSE 100 companies, which make most of their profits abroad, or those with foreign assets, have seen yet another extraordinary windfall. While the already asset-rich benefit from the falling pound, the asset-poor suffer as costs rise and the price of everyday goods imported from abroad go up.

The Government rightly intend to respect the will of the people and to do the best to make Brexit work, as do I. They must recognise, however, that the falling pound means that the British people could become poorer than they were before the referendum, at exactly the same time as real incomes have finally started to recover from the sharp squeeze after the financial crisis. The Government must acknowledge this and act if they want to make good on their promise of an economy that works for all and not just a few at the top.

**5.47 pm**

**Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab):** I am one of those Members of Parliament who campaigned for a remain vote, but who has a constituency that voted to leave—it voted 59% to 41% to leave the European Union. I fully respect the views of my constituents. Adopting the words of the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), for whom I have great respect, I am going to try to be constructive. It is very important that we make it clear that we will be leaving the European Union. We now need to engage with our constituents on the difficult issues we need to face.

The central concern of my constituents related to the immigration rules that apply to EU citizens moving to the UK. They do not like the rules and want them changed. I was struck by the excellent speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol West (Thangam Debbonaire), who advocated passionately for the freedom of movement. The reality, however, is that we do not have freedom of movement in this country; we only have freedom of movement within the European Union. There are rules in place that apply, on a daily basis, to people who are not citizens of EU states. We have to be clear that in future there will be rules that will apply to EU citizens, and some of those rules are going to be very similar to the rules that apply to non-EU citizens today. If there was a proposal by anyone to have full freedom of movement to the UK, I suspect that most Members would disagree with that approach. The difficulty is that the Government are being vague and evasive about their current position. When I intervened on the Secretary of State I asked him to set out to the House the principles that will govern rules that will apply to EU citizens. He did not do so and has not done so in any of the statements he has made to the House. It is imperative that the Government start to be explicit in setting out the principles that will govern the way in which individuals will come to the UK when we leave the European Union.

This is not a theoretical question. The Minister of State knows that Airbus is very important to my constituency, and last Friday I spoke to a Portuguese and a Spanish apprentice. Both of them asked me, “Will I be allowed to remain in the UK as an employee of Airbus in the future?” Earlier this afternoon, in connection with my role on the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport, I spoke to a company involved in the creative industries, with offices in the United States, Berlin and the UK, that wanted to know about the position of its employees. These are explicit and real questions today.

I welcome the progress the Government have made on giving more information about their position, but they will come under relentless pressure, not just from Members of this House, but from business and individuals, to make their position clear. I never thought I would say this, but I was struck by the excellent speech by the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr Clegg), who said that the Prime Minister explicitly set out the position relating to justice reforms before negotiations were conducted. That is what the Government will have to do.

**5.51 pm**

**Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP):** There can be no other issue in this country’s modern history that demands more serious scrutiny, well drafted legislation or forensic budgetary oversight than the proposal for the UK to leave the EU, so I welcome today’s motion. However, despite the apparent climbdown on the issue overnight, the Prime Minister still appeared reluctant earlier today to confirm that Parliament is at the centre of the process.

In the Prime Minister’s speech to the Scottish Conservative conference prior to the independence referendum in 2014, she outlined a future in which Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and England continue to flourish side-by-side as equal partners.” We need to see that in action. Several members of the Cabinet have now stated that there should not be a running commentary on their plans—plans that Her Majesty’s Treasury have said will potentially cost the Exchequer £66 billion per annum, almost 10% of the UK’s tax revenues. They have implored us to trust them while they negotiate on our behalf.

Should we trust the Foreign Secretary to get us the best deal, when the Prime Minister herself does not have faith in him? On June 26, he wrote of a points-based immigration system “to suit the needs of business and industry.”

Not so, says the Prime Minister. On 5 September, a spokesperson for the PM put him back in his place, stating:

“The points-based system will not work and is not an option”.

Should we, then, trust the judgment of the Secretary of State for International Trade, when the Prime Minister clearly does not? On his very first trip to the USA following his reappointment, he said that the Government would likely seek a free trade agreement with the EU rather than a closer customs union. By the end of the day, Downing Street was again forced to clarify the comments, stating that no decision had been made on whether Britain would seek to be part of the EU customs union.

What about the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union? Can we take his statements at face value? He came to this House and told us last month that “this Government are looking at every option, but the simple truth is that if a requirement of membership is giving up control of our borders, then I think that makes that very improbable.”—[Official Report, 5 September 2016; Vol. 614, c. 55.]
Twenty-four hours later, Downing Street responds. Not so fast, says the PM’s spokeswoman. Asked whether the Secretary of State was expressing a Government policy, she said:

“He is setting out his opinion. A policy tends to be a direction of travel: saying something is probable or improbable is not policy.”

If we cannot take the public statements of Cabinet Ministers at face value, if we know that we have to double check the views of senior Ministers against official Government policy, and if the record shows that even the Prime Minster, who personally appointed these people to their posts, does not agree with them on key areas of policy that will underpin these vital negotiations, how can we trust the Government to get a good deal from this process? They do not even trust each other. It is because of this fundamental point that Parliament—indeed, all Parliaments across these islands—must play a central role in scrutinising and providing democratic oversight of the process.

Let us hear from the Secretary of State today that Scotland will be firmly embedded in the UK’s process of developing its negotiating strategy. “Brexit means Brexit” does not cut it—it does not cut it at home; it does not cut it abroad—and internationally, people will be looking on and wondering how the Government of a country that claims to have the mother of all Parliaments does not cut it abroad—and internationally, people will be looking on and wondering how the Government of a country that claims to have the mother of all Parliaments does not cut it abroad; it does not cut it at home. Our constituents sent a clear message to Westminster that the current social, economic and political settlement is not working for them and that they wanted to see change. We must hear that loud and clear. Now we and the Government must ensure that their concerns are met, and that the negotiations for Brexit work for them.

However, while the message from the country to leave the EU was clear, the terms of Brexit were not on the ballot paper, and it is therefore vital, as the motion says, that Parliament plays a key role as the exit negotiations go forward. The people of Teeside voted for Brexit, but they did not vote to give the Government a blank cheque to negotiate away their jobs, their rights and their security.

As today’s discussion has shown, there were many reasons behind people’s decisions on how to vote in the EU referendum, but many people I spoke to voted to leave because they were angry about the loss of our steelworks last year, and they believed the Government when they hid behind untrue claims that they could not intervene because of EU state aid rules and that they could not tackle Chinese dumping because of EU tariff rules. So, now that we have been liberated to drive our own industrial strategy, those people are looking to the Government to protect British industry and manufacturing—but what do we see?

We see a leading Brexit Minister, the Secretary of State for International Trade, saying that the Government “must turn our back on... voices that tell us: it’s OK you can protect bits of your industry”;

and who also urged the Government to be “unreconstructed, unapologetic free traders”. So there is no protection for our vital industry in crisis—another premise on which my constituents voted swept away. Such a laissez-faire approach will have serious consequences for the UK steel industry, which has suffered from a flood of cheap Chinese steel. My constituents who voted for Brexit wanted an active, interventionist Government working to support British industry. Will the Government commit to ensuring that when we are outside the EU, vital British industries will be defended against unfair, state-sponsored competition from abroad? Will they promise that we in this House will get to debate these vital trade deals and tariffs, which will have a huge impact on British industry?

Moreover, thanks to this Government’s failure on steel, we on Teesside have a huge task to rebuild our local economy. It is vital that Brexit empowers our region and allows us to attract the inward investment we need to bring new businesses and industries to the area, creating the decent, secure, and well paid jobs we desperately need.

Our two major assets on Teesside, which will be vital to our economic recovery, are Teesport and Wilton International. Both benefit hugely from access to the European single market, and maintaining this access must be a key part of Britain’s Brexit deal. A hard Brexit, without trade agreements in place to ensure Teeside’s businesses can continue to trade freely, would be potentially disastrous for our area, threatening many thousands more jobs.

What is more, our Tees Valley devolution deal with the Government was also underpinned by access to EU funding. Will the Government confirm that these funding pots will be maintained going forward? Regional development funding has made a huge impact, supporting growth, innovation, upskilling and job creation in our region. We must continue to receive this support for Teesside’s economy to grow.

We have to make the most of the opportunities provided by Brexit, and I urge the Government to ensure that they help rather than hinder areas such as Teesside. We in Parliament, as representatives of our towns, cities and communities that will be deeply affected by these Brexit negotiations, must have a role to ensure that that happens.

5.58 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I welcome the debate. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden) when he said that it was rather sad that anyone asking for scrutiny of the Government’s strategy, or lack of it, is being accused of wanting to reverse the decision of 23 June. That is clearly not my position. I can tell the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) that what it means to me is that there is no going back, no second referendum and no deals to try to keep us in the EU by the back door. I agree with the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union who said on Monday that Britain’s mandate to leave the EU was “clear and unarguable”. I agree, but the vote did not give the Government a road map or a vision of what post-Brexit Britain will look like. We now need to
get the best possible deal for our constituents, to protect their interests and also their livelihoods. That is our duty as elected Members of Parliament.

I also do not think it fair just to sit back and ignore what the Government are doing over the next few years. I agree with what was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) about the issue of the pound. We have heard loose talk from Ministers over the last few weeks, costing people not only their jobs but their livelihoods. What we need from the Government now, rather than slogans such as “Brexit means Brexit”, is a clear framework showing what the processes will be, and an indication of their vision of a post-Brexit Britain. Instead, we have a Prime Minister who, throughout the referendum campaign, claimed to be arguing for “in” but was as quiet as a church mouse, and who is now arguing stridently that the key issue is control of immigration. The person who has had the job of controlling immigration for the past six years is standing back as though it had nothing to do with her now.

We also saw the worst kind of dog-whistle politics at last week’s Conservative conference, pandering to prejudice rather than presenting alternatives and strategies that would be in the best interests of the people. The Prime Minister is reverting to type. She is trying to rise above this, hiding behind “Brexit means Brexit” and leaving it to the three Brexiteers. Well, we have the Foreign Secretary, who gambled on hitching himself to the Brexit bandwagon in the hope that the British people would not support it, and is now floundering over what to do. We have the Secretary of State for International Trade, whose ideology and vision for the country are more akin to Republican Tea Party politics than what I think most people here would want. Finally, we have the Secretary of State for Brexit, who, on the Back Benches, was the champion of the sovereign rights of the House of Commons, and is now performing a great act as poacher turned gamekeeper. He has spoken twice in making statements to the House, and he spoke again today. Was there any illumination of the Government’s strategy? No, none at all. There would have been more power in a 40-watt lightbulb.

The decisions that are now to be made for this country will not only affect people today; they will affect the country for generations. We, as parliamentarians, have a duty to ensure that we get the best possible deal for our constituents, and also to ensure that we continue to live in a tolerant, respectful country, which I think is one of the best aspects of being part of the United Kingdom.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): When we debated the Bill that is now the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016, Brexit was not listed as a mind-altering substance, but it clearly is, given that it has completely transformed the view and changed the character of the Secretary of State and many of his colleagues in relation to the primacy of Parliament and his disdain for, or concern about, the use of the royal prerogative.

Today the Secretary of State was at the Dispatch Box yet again. We were told by the Prime Minister that there would be no running commentary on these negotiations, and that is supposedly the risk posed by the motion. The fact is, however, that we are being treated again and again to what sounds almost like a schoolboy vocalising his own fantasy commentary as he dribbles around the Dispatch Box.

We as a Parliament have the right and the duty to ensure that we best consider how these matters are dealt with. We now have a Government who are surprised to be the Government, following a Government who were also surprised by the result. The idea seems to be that Parliament has no role whatsoever, and can entrust these matters entirely to the royal prerogative and the three egos—for they are certainly not three amigos—who are meant to be leading the process. That constitutes a request for us to commit a dereliction of duty.

Like other Members, I am open about the fact that I voted remain. I am glad to report that my constituency voted overwhelmingly to remain, by over 78%, as did the people of Northern Ireland, by over 56%. Northern Ireland is a place where many of us have worked hard for many years to establish the principle of consent as the basis for our working institutions; I shall say more about that shortly. Can the Government not see, however, that allowing better parliamentary input, and even allowing a vote before the triggering of article 50, may give them an opportunity to maximise confidence that all things are being handled, and to answer the criticisms that they will meet from members of other Governments, the European Commission and the European Parliament, who will have their own commentaries on how the referendum was conducted and what it means? If they were able to say that their negotiating position had been approved by this Parliament, it would be strengthened rather than weakened.

Let us remember that even today the Secretary of State listed a whole number of sectors and interest groups that have real worries, and we know that many of those worries relate to free movement, the single market, funding and research collaboration. We cannot just say to all those people, “We’ll find out after the break.” We need to answer their questions, and we in Parliament need to ask the questions as well. The great repeal Bill will not satisfy them. After all, others have called it the great entrenchment Bill and the great incorporation, but it is really the great download and save Bill. We will simply be downloading and saving all the existing European law, but there will of course be a power to delete. The key question will be: who has that power? Will changes and amendments have to be put through Parliament in primary legislation, or will Ministers use their powers to make the changes by order? There could be a fit of ministerial joyriding as they go around doing their damage, or, to put it more currently, they might run through a whole list of European legal protections relating to the environment and workers’ rights like clowns with chainsaws. We cannot subscribe to the Government’s outrageous arrogance as they say, “It’s okay, we’ll use the royal prerogative for now, but there will be true parliamentary accountability and control after that.”

With regard to the Good Friday agreement, the Government need to stop going on about the question of a hard or soft border and about consulting the Executive. They need to tell us whether the provisions in annex A of the Good Friday agreement relating to the opportunity for a united Ireland and the provisions in schedule 1 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 will specifically be written into a UK-EU treaty, because they will have to be.
Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): I am a passionate pro-European, and I campaigned very hard for the remain cause. In common with the constituencies of my fellow black country representatives, my constituency voted by something like two to one to leave. I would ignore that result at my peril, and I would not disrespect it anyway. However, I represent a constituency that has more foundries in it than any other in the United Kingdom. They are closely integrated into the automotive and civil aviation supply chain, which not only depends on the single market to sell its products but is part of a highly integrated process that also depends on being part of a single market. The dilemma that I face—which is reflected to a certain extent in the challenge facing the Government—is how to reconcile the genuine fears of the public with the needs of those who are working in those industries and are dependent on their success, which is in turn dependent on the single market.

In debates about Europe during previous Governments, the previous Prime Minister might have been keen to criticise the EU for domestic political reasons, but he was adamant that remaining part of the single market was very important for the future of this country. During the referendum campaign, an argument was peddled by the leavers that Britain was so important to the EU’s trading relations that the EU would not dare to insist that we leave the single market. I have some private sympathy with that argument. Once we got past the initial shock and the immediate adverse economic reaction to our leaving the EU, business and the economy recovered almost instinctively, because the mood music suggested that that would indeed be the situation.

As the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) explained, the situation unfortunately changed as a result of comments by Ministers at the Tory party conference. Having said in September that they were not going to spell out their negotiating position in the Chamber, they appeared to take very hard public positions at conference on their negotiating stance with the EU. That completely changed the balance of the public’s and business’s perception of what the Government’s approach was going to be. It came across that the priority was immigration, immigration, immigration, and not the single market.

Stephen Phillips (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Bailey: No, I am not taking interventions.

The reaction of business, higher education and the markets since then has potentially caused us huge problems. That underlines the need for the Secretary of State for Brexit to reverse his position and come to this House to spell out priorities that emphasise our commitment, as a Chamber, to being part of the single market. Without that, we might go into the negotiations with our negotiating parties thinking we have no such commitment.

6.10 pm

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Brexit might mean Brexit, but what does it really mean? It means something different to everyone—like beauty, it is very much in the eye of the beholder. One thing is absolutely clear, however: the EU referendum was a shout out from the British people that they want to be listened to and no longer to be patronised and ignored. For the British Government to say that they know what the British people mean by Brexit is to betray the same patronising, arrogant, distant, know-it-all attitude that the EU vote was railing against. It is justly ironic.

As the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) said in an excellent contribution, we have a duty to take people with us. Our duty is to listen to what real people say. Confusing and contradictory it may be, but it is very real. There is the local farmer who said to me that he voted leave but desperately wants to retain freedom of movement; the local businessman who said to me he voted leave but wants to retain full access to the single market; the local grandmother who said to me she voted leave but wants her grandchildren to enjoy the freedoms and peace of the last 60 years in their future; and the local steelworker who said to me he voted leave because he thought it would provide more protection for the steel industry, although as we have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Redcar (Anna Turley), that has been put at risk by the statements of the Secretary of State for International Trade.

The reality is more contradictory and nuanced than the Europhobes would have us believe. People want to come out, but they do not want to lose out. For all their healthy scepticism and doubt about their politicians—us—they have high expectations of us. They expect us to marry these contradictions and to square the circle in their interests. That is our overwhelming responsibility.

That does not mean rushing headlong for a hard Brexit in some vainglorious, jingoistic charge of the Light Brigade, damaging our country and our people. We, the sovereign Parliament of this United Kingdom must listen to all our citizens—the 48% who voted remain, as well as the 52% who voted leave; the 65% of eligible voters who did not vote leave, as well as the 35% who did. We must bring about Brexit in a way that delivers for the people.

Standing in front of a full class of 16 and 17-year-olds last week at John Leggott College, where I used to be principal, the subject turned to the EU referendum. I asked the class how many of them would have voted leave. Not one hand went up. I said, “Come on, don’t be shy—put your hands up.” They said, “No, no, we would all have voted remain.” So I said, “How many of your parents voted leave?” and half of them put their hands up. We have an obligation to deliver for those people who did not vote, as well as for those who did.

That does not mean we should overturn the judgment of the British people to leave the European Union, but it does mean we need to listen and that we should interpret and deliver that judgment in a way that benefits us all for the future. I went to—I think that will do, actually, Mr Speaker.

6.14 pm

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): What a great ending. Like my colleagues, I was unambiguously in favour of Britain staying in the EU. However, I accept that we were unable to convince voters of our arguments. As a democrat, I firmly believe that, as we took the choice to hold a referendum and as that referendum cost the Prime Minister his job, there can be no doubt that the Government should get on with the job of negotiating our exit from the EU.
It was, however, a very close verdict. On the night of the poll, we were able to get 5/1 against Brexit happening. We had Nigel Farage on the television, telling us—wrong again—that remain was going to win, and also telling us that, in the event of remain winning, we should have another referendum. He said that the campaign was not over and that we were going to have another vote. We should not forget that many of those people who are now saying that we should get on and accept the result were telling us that, in the event of a remain vote, we should have a second referendum.

I regret the instant campaign for a second referendum; the result was legitimate. Although it was a close call, those advocating a second referendum on the basis that the British people did not know what they were voting for were ill advised. This thrust to ask people to vote again undermines that perfectly legitimate demand for proper debate about what the shape of our future relationship with Europe should look like.

Although the leave campaign was vague on the details of what a post-Brexit relationship with Europe and the rest of the world would look like, and the campaign promises that were made have disappeared like a spring frost in the days since, there were, my constituents who voted leave believed, some clear commitments that were made. The first was that we would be able to continue to trade with our European partners—they imported fewer of our goods than we did of theirs, we were told and they were still going to want to sell us their BMWs. We were also told that pulling out of the EU would open new doors to all these other markets that we were currently unable to access.

The second thing that my constituents heard was that there would be a reduction in immigration and that we would take back control of our borders. They clearly believed that leaving the European Union would enable Britain to control freedom of movement and to reduce immigration.

At a time when our NHS is so stretched, it is complete madness for the Government to send out a message to foreign doctors that they may be welcome now but they might not be in the future, that they can come here, set up home here and have children here but that in a few years’ time if we can train up some doctors they might all have to go. It is madness, because our NHS cannot cope without those doctors and other healthcare professionals. There are many other skills on which we rely from overseas. If the Government are trying to send that message, they are absolutely insane.

Thirdly, my constituents expect Britain to be better off as a result of leaving the EU. The £350 million for the NHS may have already disappeared, but whatever the Government choose to spend money on, there is a clear expectation that there will be more money to be spent in the UK as a result of Brexit.

As a remainder, I can say that if the Government deliver on those three tests, there will be no need for a second referendum. What worries me is that this decision is being driven by intra-party concerns within the Tory party. We have a Prime Minister who, rather ambiguously, was on the remain side and who is now trying to show that, as her party is dominated by activists on the leave side, she will be good to that promise. As a result of that, a very, very hard Brexit proposal is being brought forward. It was very revealing that, before joining the team of advisers for the Secretary of State for Brexit, Raoul Ruparel said:

“It is concerning that, at this stage, the UK Government still seems to be debating the most basic tenets of Brexit when the time is upon us to be drafting a detailed approach.”

We need that detailed approach, which is why I support the motion on the Order Paper.

6.18 pm

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): I am very pleased to have this opportunity to speak in favour of the motion on the parliamentary scrutiny of the UK leaving the EU, which was put down by my hon. and right hon. Friends. We all want Parliament to scrutinise the negotiating strategy before Ministers trigger article 50, but I am in favour of us having a vote on it as well.

Article 50 states that it should be triggered in line with our constitutional arrangements. Well, I think if anybody was asked to define Britain’s constitution, they would say that it is basically a parliamentary democracy. They would not say that it is a royal autocracy or that it is a bit like the Kingdom of Bhutan. Therefore, for the Government to choose to use the royal prerogative is to choose to do something that is arcane, undemocratic and secretive, and none of those is conducive to a good deal.

The hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), who is sadly not in his place at the moment, was confident that the Government would have to come back because of the Standing Orders of the House. I hope that the Government will come back, but we see no sign of that at the moment from Ministers or their lawyers. They are still fighting a case to defend the royal prerogative. They are saying that compelling the Government to introduce legislation would be to trespass on Parliament. When I asked the Secretary of State about that on Monday, he gave a very interesting reply. He said:

“The main guidance I gave to the Attorney General was that a would-be vote in this House on article 50 could have two outcomes. It either lets it through or it stops it... It would be a refusal to implement the decision of the British people”.—[Official Report, 10 October 2016, Vol. 49, c. 615.]

The Secretary of State should go back to his original idea of producing a White Paper. As many hon. Members have said, people voted for Brexit, but they did not vote on how to Brexit. If the Secretary of State followed his initial idea of producing a White Paper, the Government could set out different options for Brexit—whether soft or hard, or something more complicated would probably be better—and the House could vote on which Brexit strategy it thought would be best. That is not a completely revolutionary new process; it is the process that we used when we voted on House of Lords reform in the last Parliament, and I commend it to Ministers. The leave campaigners voted to restore parliamentary sovereignty and take back control, and that is exactly what we should do.

I am extremely concerned about the problems with the customs union. I remind the House that the customs union was established in 1968. It is what we joined in 1973. It is what people voted in favour of last time we had a referendum in 1975. Although people clearly have reservations about immigration, European law and the
European Court of Justice, most people are in favour of what they call the Common Market. I am very keen that one of the options that the Government keep on the table is that we remain within the customs union because, without it, we will see a huge burden on the 40% of our exports that go to the EU.

6.22 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): First, I am pleased that the Government have acknowledged in their amendment that they have a negotiating position. That is a major step forward. I am also pleased that an unelected Prime Minister has deigned to give Parliament an opportunity to discuss this in due course. It is a real shame that the Prime Minister did not start her premiership by giving that commitment; instead, she has been forced to capitulate to the reasonable demands of so many people across the House.

The fact that the Prime Minister even gave thought to gagging Parliament—that is what it was in the first place—is shocking. If she cannot get a major constitutional issue right, what hope is there for the ability to negotiate a deal with the EU, especially with three members of her Cabinet leading the charge who cannot even agree among themselves who is leading on what?

I am afraid that the Government are not even in the happy position of making things up as they go along. By their standards, that would be a rational and systematic approach to the negotiations. No, the three amigos, as the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) referred to them, are somewhere in the English channel without a tiller or an oar between them. They are drifting, and the problem is that they are not the ones who are paying the price for their incompetence—an incompetence dressed up as a need for confidentiality, or else the Germans or the French will be able to see our hand. Well, I will let the Government in on a secret: we do not have a hand to show anyone, including ourselves.

We have had bluster again from the Foreign Secretary, who has been ruminating across Europe, so he tells us. We have the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union’s misguided, nonchalant and insouciant attitude at the Dispatch Box, which makes Sergeant Wilson from “Dad’s Army” look positively frenetic, but without the charm. Meanwhile, as the right hon. Member for Sheffield, Hallam (Mr Clegg) said, the Secretary of State for International Trade “doesn’t have a job and he doesn’t appear to have realised that yet.”

That sums up the whole fiasco that is the Government’s position. On 19 July, I asked the Chief Secretary to the Treasury how many civil servants had been involved in planning, and he could not answer. That is typical as well.

Liverpool, Bootle—my constituency—and the wider borough of Sefton voted to remain in Europe. I expect that part of the reason for that is that during the 1990s and 1980s, the Tory Government took a sleddgehame to the social and economic infrastructure of Merseyside, and the European Community was the only institution that continued to support my constituency. In fact, while we were being cut adrift by the Tories, with the odd honourable exception of people such as Lord Heseltine, the European Community was the only substantial lifeline, both economically and socially, for my community. We looked to the EC for support, and we got it; we did not get it from the Conservatives.

As a port with a long history of looking out to the world, we are not afraid to meet and greet other nations; in fact, that is part of what makes us who we are—tolerant and outward-looking. We do not want the Government’s lack of a plan to halt the growth in the Merseyside economy—the second largest growth outside of London. Frankly, there is little in the statement from the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union that gives me any confidence whatever that the Government will deliver anything for my city region. The Government are silent on that aspect, as on many others, and that is really not good enough. The three Secretaries of State were vociferous in their demand to leave, but they are absolutely silent on what comes next.

6.26 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd). My parents hail from his constituency, and we are familiar, as a family, with both the devastation of the Merseyside economy and the role that the EU has played in supporting it over the years.

I am glad to see the Government’s engagement with the motion. The lack of regard for Parliament in the Brexit process until now has been completely unacceptable and unjustifiable. Some 48% of people across the UK—almost half—voted to remain in the EU. In my constituency, more than three quarters of residents who voted wanted to remain, and many who voted leave did so on the basis of promises that have proved at best hollow and at worst simply untrue.

While I respect the narrow result of the EU referendum, it cannot for one second be considered a mandate to negotiate Brexit on any terms that the Prime Minister sees fit. The terms must be subject to full and proper parliamentary scrutiny, and the British people must, as a minimum, have the opportunity to voice, through their elected representatives, whether or not they consider the emerging terms of negotiation acceptable.

In my constituency, there is huge alarm and, it is no exaggeration to say, distress about Brexit. Young people whose lives could be fundamentally different as a consequence of Brexit, who did not have the opportunity to vote, and who, if they had been able to vote, as they should have been, may well have changed the decision feel particularly aggrieved. I met a group of students in my constituency last week whose anger and sense of disfranchisement were palpable.

EU nationals living in my constituency, many of whom work in our public services, feel bereft. I have spoken to many who say that although they have been in the UK for many years, this is the first time that they have ever felt unwelcome and unwanted in the community that they consider to be home. The business community in my constituency—3,500 small and medium-sized enterprises—tells me that it feels that the Government simply do not understand the potential impact of Brexit on small businesses. Small developers in my constituency, whom we desperately need to deliver more homes, are putting schemes on hold because of the uncertainty.

My local NHS trust is under severe financial pressure; many of those in the workforce on which it is dependent come from overseas. They work hard to serve our community and feel frankly insulted by some of the rhetoric that the Government have put out about foreign workers. My NHS workers would like to know whether...
and when our local trust will get a share of the £350 million a week that was promised, and when the Government will be clear that those workers are valued, irrespective of where they come from, for the contribution that they make to treating and caring for sick patients.

I am pleased that the Government appear to have recognised the need for parliamentary scrutiny in the Brexit negotiations. They must be clear that that will include a vote. We, too, must be clear. What will be the approach to the single market? How will the Government manage the risk to sterling? What will replace the European arrest warrant? What will be the impact of limitations on freedom of movement on the NHS and other critical services? What will be the status of British citizens living in the EU? How will workers’ rights be protected? What will be the impact on our universities and students, and on scientific and medical research, and how will the Government mitigate those impacts? What will be done to ensure that the loss of subsidy and investment is mitigated across the country? Those issues, and many more, were not the subject of the EU referendum question, but the consequences of the decisions made on them will be profound and will echo across generations to come. They are of the utmost importance to my constituents, and it is the responsibility of all of us in this House to play a full role in holding the Government to account.

6.29 pm

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): The EU referendum laid bare two truths about British society. First, we are a divided country with deep fissures between communities and regions on a range of issues, from economic inequality and control of the UK’s borders to the very nature of Britain and our place in the world. The second truth is that there is a destructive and almost complete lack of trust in politics across large parts of our country.

Those two truths severely detract from our ability to make a success of Brexit, so we must act decisively and quickly to rebuild trust in our politics and to heal the fractures in our society. The Government’s approach to the Brexit process must have that necessity at its core, recognising that trust is built on openness and clarity, which is particularly important as the stakes for our country are high, and the immense power that the Brexit process confers on the Government will shape our society for generations to come. It is a sobering responsibility, and to fulfil it the Government must be open and clear with the British people.

From what we have seen, we can only assume that the Government are steering us with a misplaced swagger and hubris towards the rocks of a harsh, intolerant Brexit, but no one can be sure. The Government either do not want us to know what they are planning or they simply do not know themselves. Moreover, given that the referendum gave no specific mandate for a negotiating position, the Government must make it clear to the British people what they intend for their future.

Without parliamentary involvement, engagement and scrutiny, the only route for holding the Executive to account will be through Whitehall whispers, Fleet Street filtering and disgruntled score settling. After a referendum vote that was not, as the Prime Minister now seems to suggest, completely one-sided, but quite evenly balanced, we must find a path to Brexit that is driven by the national interest, rather than by the Prime Minister’s need to manage the warring factions of her party.

That path must run through Parliament, which should have full legislative and scrutiny powers. This is not a ploy to void the result of the referendum; it is a vital action to meet the referendum’s central demand that the UK take back control through a fully sovereign Parliament. The Opposition have absolutely no desire to see the result of the referendum overturned—it must stand. We are simply here to articulate the interests of the people we were elected to represent. Our responsibility is to secure the best possible deal for our country and our communities, whether it is in steel trade defence instruments or replacing EU regional investment funding and beyond.

Leadership is about building consensus and taking people with you. The Prime Minister should trust that Parliament is up to the task of playing a sober and constructive role at a decisive time for our country. The Prime Minister must act to restore the people’s faith in our parliamentary democracy by setting out how the Brexit process and subsequent withdrawal will work, and how both will be subject to the full scrutiny of Parliament every step of the way. It is only by proving that we in Parliament can work together to make a success of Brexit that we can rebuild trust in our politics and heal our fractured and divided society.

6.33 pm

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): Much has been said about the extent of the economic impact of leaving the EU, as well as the social, political and cultural effects. There are questions to be answered on criminal justice, homeland security, border control, data sharing and environmental law. Hon. Members have addressed those subjects, so I will speak about regional funding.

For my Neath constituency, that will be a defining issue of any Brexit deal.

I am proud of the EU investment that has been made in west Wales and the valleys, but less proud of the fact that that money is needed because we are one of the poorest regions in Europe. I am fearful of the time when that money no longer exists. When I visit communities across my constituency and the wider region, I find vibrancy and tenacity, despite hardship and economic decline. EU funding has brought community infrastructure, training, apprenticeships and regeneration, and there is no doubt that these structural funds have played a central role in the rebirth of the valleys. The decline of the mining industry ripped away the economic foundations of my constituency and thousands of people found themselves unemployed, but a visitor to Neath today will see businesses starting up, new shops and a £13 million town centre redevelopment in progress.

The economy of Neath and its villages is growing, and that growth is down to effective investment of European funds secured by our wonderful Labour MEP, Derek Vaughan. The last round of funding launched 485 businesses, supported 7,300 people into work and created 1,355 jobs, and 14,870 qualifications have been gained. Close to 5,000 people have completed an EU-funded apprenticeship.

Neath Port Talbot has been lead partner on Workways, a project delivered across the county borough and then extended throughout the west Wales region when its
success was proved. The project has helped tackle barriers that prevented individuals finding or returning to employment, thanks to £16.7 million in EU funding. Swansea Bay campus, which has had a beneficial impact on Neath and the region, would not have happened without the £95 million of European funding.

No one knows the process that will follow article 50 and the fate of projects during this period, let alone beyond the two-year timeframe. The Welsh Government have already reprogrammed existing funding, and yesterday they announced that Communities First, their flagship programme for tackling poverty, will be cut in order to reinvest the money in projects that would previously have relied on EU funding.

If parliamentary sovereignty is paramount, surely Parliament should have a say in the negotiations, the process and the deal on exiting the EU. We need full scrutiny, because the Government need to be held to account. The national Parliaments of EU member states will demand a say in ratifying Britain's exit, and it is only right that this House is involved in ameliorating the effects of unravelling a 40-year relationship and the work it will take to establish new trade deals. What will the Government do to protect the 100,000 jobs in Wales that depend on our trade with Europe, and the thousands of people in my constituency who have found work through the support of the European Union?

6.37 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): For the avoidance of doubt, we intend to accept the Government's amendment. Today's debate has been one of the finest I can remember in this House. The contributions from right hon. and hon. Members read like a Baedeker guide to the United Kingdom. We heard from the right hon. and learned Members for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) and for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry), my right hon. friend the Members for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband) and for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), the right hon. Member for Walsall North (Emma Reynolds) and for Wallasey (Ms Eagle) and for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey), the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), my right hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton South East (Mr McFadden), the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), and my hon. Friend the Members for Foyle (Mark Durkan) and for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman). They all made absolutely superb speeches. I must also pay respect to speeches made on the other side of the debate, from the hon. Members for Stone (Sir William Cash), for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) and for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), which I thought were particularly worthy of note.

It is right that this debate has taken place, and it was good that the Government acceded to the will of Parliament by accepting the right of this House, and indeed its duty, properly to scrutinise their proposals for leaving the EU before article 50 is invoked. After the Prime Minister herself had insisted that the referendum was about the country taking back sovereign control over its own affairs, it would have been difficult for her Government to maintain that this sovereign Parliament had no such right to scrutinise and express its will in relation to the

biggest constitutional challenge our country has faced in a generation. I therefore genuinely welcome the Government's concession on the matter.

What today's debate has made clear is that whatever way Members voted in the referendum, leave or remain, the vast majority do not wish to overturn the referendum vote. We are democrats: however small the margin of victory, a 52% to 48% vote for leave is a majority. It represents a mandate and it must be respected.

Let us be equally clear, however, that the need to respect the 17 million votes cast for leave does not mean that the rights and concerns of the 16 million who voted to remain can be trampled on. Although we of course accept that no Government should give a running commentary on the details of their negotiation, any responsible Government must give a coherent and reasoned picture of what sort of future they aim to achieve for their citizens.

Business leaders are demanding not certainty, but clarity. Everyone accepts that negotiations will be tough and protracted, and that means an inevitable period of uncertainty, but that should not stop the Government from being clear in their purpose and objectives. Our respect for our constituents must surely insist that they have a right to know what our future relationship with the EU might look like—after all, their jobs, welfare and livelihoods, and the future of their children and grandchildren, are at stake. We are asking for clarity on the terms of the UK's leaving the EU.

Sir William Cash: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Barry Gardiner: No, I will not.

Parliament has a duty to ensure that the various final options are considered accordingly and not simply forced through; Parliament has an obligation to ensure that each of them is properly debated and clearly presented to the British people. Every Member appreciates that each of the different possible outcomes of our leaving the EU has both advantages and downsides, and it would be morally repugnant for anyone to pretend that there is only one sort of Brexit. That would be a lie: it would be to perpetrate a deception on the British people. The debate of June has moved on. We can no longer debate whether we leave the EU, but we absolutely must debate how we do that.

The Government are clearly experiencing certain strains between their Treasury wing and their Brexit triumvirate, but my purpose is not to make political hay with that dispute. In fact, I believe that it is right that the Government are having a serious debate and considering the various options. Our point is simply that this is not a discussion that the Government can keep to themselves. Parliament must be part of that discussion, and the British public have a right to their say.

Our role as politicians and leaders of our different communities is to present all the different possible options for how to leave the EU to our constituents and to let them inform the final decision that this sovereign Parliament must make. Our sovereignty rests on the sovereignty of the people.

It is important, too, that we also understand the limits of that sovereignty. It is said that politicians propose and markets dispose. Sovereignty does not give us control over the confidence that others have in the
strength of our currency. It was not for no reason that the Bank of England put £70 billion of extra liquidity into the UK economy immediately after the referendum result and lowered interest rates by a quarter point. Some commentators who are fond of reminding us that after the Brexit vote the sky did not fall in should perhaps consider that Mark Carney and the Monetary Policy Committee were pumping liquidity into the system precisely to prop it up. Sovereignty certainly does not give us control over the markets; over the past week, we have seen all too clearly the markets’ violent reaction when they thought that the Government were proposing to leave both the single market and the customs union. Today the pound stands at a 168-year low.

The Government can insist. They can exercise the royal prerogative and decide to withdraw from the preferential terms of access to the world’s largest consumer market that the UK currently enjoys, but they are very mistaken if they confuse that exercise of sovereignty with any real control over the investment decisions that companies will then take about the future of our constituents’ jobs and wages. If the market is right to have devalued the UK’s stocks so significantly, and if it is right in thinking that investors will no longer invest and that the UK’s economic prospects have declined, we need to understand that our current account deficit—which currently runs at £28.7 billion, and which the fiscal rule was supposed to abolish, before it was abolished itself—is only likely to widen. The Government have a responsibility to set out precisely how they propose to deal with that economic fact, because, again, this is about the jobs, wages and wellbeing of our constituents.

As the Chancellor himself said, “the British people did not vote...to become poorer or less secure”, but we must be open with the electorate that the prize of regaining full sovereignty is that we will no longer have any control over the regulation and standards in a market with which we currently have 44% of our exports and 53% of our imports. We must be open with the electorate that the control over the movement of people from the EU that the Prime Minister spoke of at Prime Minister’s questions earlier today will also affect the capacity of companies to hire those with the skills they need to grow and prosper, and to employ more people here in the UK.

I am not in the habit of quoting the Daily Mail—I often like neither what it says, nor the way in which it says it—but none of us should ignore what it says today. In an otherwise misleading and confused editorial, it says:

“what the public voted for was simple: to regain control of our borders in order to end mass immigration; reclaim control of our laws; and stop sending billions of pounds to Brussels. None of this is possible inside the single market—which requires the free movement of workers”.

If the Government believe that—and I believe they do—the question must be asked why they will not admit that they have ruled out maintaining the access we currently enjoy to the single market.

Immigration is the political heart of the Brexit debate, and we in the Labour party state unequivocally that those EU workers currently in the UK contributing to our economy must be allowed to stay, just as the 1.2 million UK citizens living and working in the rest of the EU must be. We in the Labour party also put it on record that the principle of the free movement of workers must be changed, and our new relationship with the EU must put in place clear and fair immigration controls that work to the benefit of the British people.

However, there will be a cost in terms of market access, investment, jobs and our constituents’ livelihoods. Why are the Government afraid to say so? The answer is that they do not want to admit the financial consequences that must inevitably follow from such an admission. The free traders are actually fighting against the financial consequences of leaving the largest free trade market in the world.

The Government have 170 days. The Secretary of State can continue to duck and dive as he did today—42 minutes in which he said nothing—but democracy demands that the Government should publish the terms of Brexit and submit them to the scrutiny of this sovereign Parliament, and the people of Britain will not trust this Government until they do.

6.48 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Jones): May I join the hon. Member for Brent North (Barry Gardiner) in congratulating all Members who contributed to this excellent debate about what the motion rightly describes as the “defining issue” facing the United Kingdom?

We agree that it is entirely proper that Parliament should scrutinise the Government’s approach to the process of leaving the European Union and that there should be full and continuing debate on that process. It is beyond doubt—this was fully accepted by the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve)—that the process of leaving the European Union and that there should be full and continuing debate on that process. It is beyond doubt—this was fully accepted by the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) in congratulating European Union (Mr David Jones):

Mr Jones: Will the Minister give way?

Stephen Gethins: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Jones: I will not because I have very little time.

The referendum held on 23 June was one of the biggest democratic exercises in British history. The turnout was high, at 72%, with over 33 million people participating. Over 1 million more people voted to leave than to remain. The turnout was bigger than at any general election since 1992. No single party or Prime Minister has achieved more votes in our history than did the vote to leave in June. This was a once-in-a-generation vote, and that decision must be respected. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) said, we now all have a duty as Members of this House to respect, and not to seek to frustrate, the will of the people of the United Kingdom. I am pleased to observe that most hon. Members who have participated today have agreed with that proposition.

The Government recognise that Parliament must play a full part in the United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the EU, and we will of course observe in full all legal and constitutional obligations that apply during the course of withdrawal. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said, we are committed to working with Parliament as we seek to obtain the best deal for...
Britain in that process of withdrawal. Let me be absolutely clear, however, that triggering the article 50 procedure is a matter for the royal prerogative.

We will take fully into account the views of all Members in our parliamentary engagement, which has already, in the short life of my Department, been extensive. Debates such as today’s are part of the process whereby Parliament will hold the Government to account. So far, in the two and a half working weeks since the summer recess, my right hon. Friend has made two oral statements and appeared before two Select Committees. In his opening speech, he listed the parliamentary engagements that Ministers from his Department have attended and will continue to attend. This Government welcome and encourage such participation.

The restoration of parliamentary sovereignty is at the very core of why we are leaving the European Union. Once we have left, the primacy of the United Kingdom Parliament will no longer be in doubt. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) said, that is what the great repeal Bill will secure.

Ms Angela Eagle: Will the Minister give way?

Stephen Gethins: Will the Minister give way?

Ian C. Lucas: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Jones: I will not give way.

I have no doubt that the Bill will be subject to rigorous scrutiny by both Houses of Parliament during its passage. It will be for Parliament to determine what changes to the law in the great repeal Bill will best suit the national interest, but the national interest must be the paramount consideration for both the Government and Parliament.

We will shortly be entering into extensive and detailed negotiations about the terms of our withdrawal. It is entirely right that the Government should not damage our position in those negotiations by spelling out in fine detail what our negotiating position will be.

Ian C. Lucas: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Jones: I will not give way.

Nobody sensible would expect us to do so, least of all those with whom we will be negotiating. My right hon. Friend has already set out the broad aims of our negotiation, which include, crucially, regaining control of our borders and having the most open access possible to the European market, but I am sure that hon. Members will understand the practical realities of our withdrawal negotiations. Indeed, the House of Lords EU Committee has summarised what it considers to be the correct approach to parliamentary scrutiny:

“We acknowledge that certain elements of the forthcoming negotiations, particularly those relating to trade, may have to be conducted confidentially. We would expect parliamentary scrutiny of the negotiations to strike an appropriate balance between transparency and confidentiality, while achieving the overarching objective of holding the Government effectively to account.”

Ian C. Lucas: I will put to the right hon. Gentleman the question I put to the Secretary of State. If he believes in parliamentary sovereignty, will the Government please present their opening position to Parliament for scrutiny and a vote before they begin to conduct negotiations? Will he give the Chamber an assurance on that?

Mr Jones: The House will of course be fully engaged as matters progress, but I have to repeat to the hon. Gentleman—and I remind him that I have been more generous in giving way than was his colleague the hon. Member for Brent North—that he has to understand the element of confidentiality in the negotiations that was quite rightly identified by the House of Lords EU Committee. We fully agree that that balance will have to be struck, which is why we seek to amend the motion. We agree that there should be a transparent debate on the Government’s plans for leaving the EU and that there should be proper—

Stephen Gethins rose—

Mr Jones: I will not give way further.

But that process should also respect the decision of the British people to leave the EU and should not adversely affect our negotiating position. We believe that is the sensible position to adopt. It is one that I believe would receive the approval of most sensible people in this country. We do not propose to veil our preparations for negotiation in secrecy, but at the same time we want to serve the national interest, which means going about the negotiations in a practical and sensible manner.

One theme that was developed during the course of the debate and raised by a number of right hon. and hon. Members, including the right hon. Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), my hon. Friends the Members for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) and for Dudley South (Mike Wood) and the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas), was membership of the single market and freedom of movement. The Government’s position is that although the ability to trade with EU member states is clearly vital to our prosperity, there is clearly no mandate for a deal that involves accepting the existing arrangements governing free movement of people from the European Union, but we do not accept that there is a binary trade-off between border control and access to the single market for goods and services. We are aiming for the best deal for Britain. That is what all hon. Members should strive for.

I wish to reiterate my thanks and those of the hon. Member for Brent North to all hon. Members who have participated in the debate. There have been excellent contributions from a large number of Members. It was heartening that another theme that developed was that we must understand that the referendum is over and has been completed, and we all have to accept the result and move on together as a House in the national interest. That point was most clearly expressed by my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt).

We will give full consideration to all the points raised so clearly by so many right hon. and hon. Members today, and the further points that will no doubt similarly be raised in the weeks and months to come. We are happy to accept the Opposition’s motion, which is helpful and has been the catalyst for an excellent debate that has developed the argument significantly, subject to the addition of the words contained in the amendment.
This country now stands on the threshold of a new chapter in its history, and a new relationship with the continuing members of the European Union. Every single Member of this House, I know, will want our withdrawal to be a success for the national interest. I believe that the amendment is entirely proper and commend it to the House.

Amendment (b) agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House recognises that leaving the EU is the defining issue facing the UK; believes that there should be a full and transparent debate on the Government’s plan for leaving the EU; and calls on the Prime Minister to ensure that this House is able properly to scrutinise that plan for leaving the EU before Article 50 is invoked; and believes that the process should be undertaken in such a way that respects the decision of the people of the UK when they voted to leave the EU on 23 June and does not undermine the negotiating position of the Government as negotiations are entered into which will take place after Article 50 has been triggered.

PETITIONS

Mr Speaker: Order. We come now to petitions. I see the clock is running. It strikes me as unimaginable that Members do not wish to listen to the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) as he presents his petition, but if they are disinclined to do so, perhaps they could do him and me and the House the courtesy of leaving quickly and quietly, so that the rest of us can enjoy, however briefly, his oratory.

Implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts

7 pm

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I present the petition of Susan Carter of Ringwood and some 80 other constituents of the New Forest West parliamentary division who support the campaign for Women Against State Pension Inequality. The petitioners urge that the House of Commons makes a fair transitional arrangement for women born on or after 6 April 1951, who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase in the state pension age.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of New Forest West,

Declares that as a result of the way in which the 1995 Pension Act and the 2011 Pension Act were implemented, women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age; further that hundreds of thousands of women have had significant changes imposed on them with little or no personal notice; further that implementation took place faster than promised; further that this gave no time to make alternative pension plans; and further that retirement plans have been shattered with devastating consequences.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I beg to present a petition on behalf of Mrs Tina Scriven, leader of the Chester WASPI group, and more than 100 other petitioners from the City of Chester, in the same terms described by the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne), and described so ably last night in the House by my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), calling for justice and fairness for women born in the 1950s.

The Petition of the residents of City of Chester.

Mr Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): I seek to present a petition signed by 83 members of my constituency in terms similar to that presented by my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne). I have told my petitioners that I agree with them on the need to try to establish fair transitional arrangements for women born on or after 6 April 1951, who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the state pension age.

The Petition of the residents of Christchurch.

Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): I rise to present a petition relating to the implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts. More than 200 of my constituents have signed the petition. Credit for collecting those names should go to my local WASPI campaigners, who have brought together many Teessiders who are affected, and organised local activity against that injustice. I hope the Government listen to them. The petitioners request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born on or after 6 April 1951, who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase in the state pension age.

The Petition of the residents of Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland.
Gypsies and Travellers

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

7.4 pm

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I am grateful to colleagues who have stayed and I will be more than happy to take interventions.

On the sunny morning of 26 May this year, an eight-year-old boy climbed over the fence of a Traveller site in my constituency to chat to the Minister’s predecessor, Baroness Susan Williams, a local farmer whose land we were on, and to me. He was a delightful boy, but his prospects are destined to be much less good than many children of his age. A 2014 report from the Office for National Statistics shows that he is far less likely to gain any qualifications compared with the rest of the population, more likely to be at risk of work and is likely to have worse health. The report found that 60% of adult Travellers had no qualifications, compared with 23% for the rest of the country, and that 20% were employed compared to 7% for the national population.

In 2016, in the fifth-richest nation in the world, this boy was living on a site with no proper sewerage system and no legal water supply, and he had not been in school for several weeks despite the best efforts of the local authority. I also question the quality of home schooling provided by parents who have themselves low levels of educational attainment.

The site he lives on had three major incidents of modern slavery, a recent murder, frequent fighting between different Traveller groups, and significant sub-letting of pitches to vulnerable groups and some east Europeans in often the most atrocious of conditions. I do not believe that our current Traveller policy is in the best interests of that young boy and that is one reason why I am calling for a cross-governmental review. Would he include the Government in that list the Department for Education? As he rightly says, the educational outcomes for those children are in that list the Department for Education? As he rightly says, the educational outcomes for those children are.

In 2014, the fifth-richest nation in the world, a boy living on a Traveller site with no proper sewerage system was more likely to be out of work and is likely to have worse health. The report found that 60% of adult Travellers had no qualifications, compared with 23% for the rest of the country, and that 20% were unemployed compared to 7% for the national population.

Andrew Selous: I totally agree with my right hon. Friend.

Some settled residents have had their water supply disconnected completely by the Travellers, as they have sought to augment a supply that was never part of the planning permission for the site. A mother wrote to me recently and entitled her letter “A plea from the children” of her town who have been unable to use the brilliant new £250,000 skate park for much of the summer because of 10 unauthorised Traveller encampments next to it.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way. I know a lot of Members want to intervene. My constituency, like the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Sir Simon Burns), had a number of encampments. In calling for a review, will my hon. Friend consider the impact of unauthorised encampments on local communities?

Andrew Selous: My hon. Friend makes a powerful point and in doing so speaks up for her constituency.

The skate park I just mentioned was being defaced on, and local children had had their bicycles stolen by the Travellers. Other mothers have said that children have been too scared to go to the leisure centre for their swimming lessons, as they find the Travellers very intimidating. Even the staff of the leisure centre are too scared to ask them to pay. I was bitten by two of the Travellers’ dogs as I walked around the site.

In respect of the life chances and vulnerabilities of Traveller children, I learned that last month one of my constituents witnessed a fight between Traveller children. When their father came out of his caravan, instead of stopping the fight he taught them how to really hurt one another more effectively. I argue that children’s services would have a better chance of protecting children like that if the 24% of Travellers who live in caravans or mobile homes were to join the 76% who live in houses, flats and bungalows. Neighbours witnessing behaviour like that would at least have an address to report.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that greater attention must be paid to the education of the children? This needs to be done in a very sensitive fashion, because the community feel attacked and marginalised. As such, co-operative help within the community is needed by all to help with their education and move them from where they are to where they could be.

Andrew Selous: I totally agree. Traveller children should be able to aspire to be engineers, scientists or anything else they want to be.

One of my parish councillors wrote recently saying that his village had frankly felt under siege this summer and that help was desperately needed. Local landowners and the local authority are facing the constant expense of having to go through the courts to have caravans moved and are then left with the foul job of cleaning up the disgusting mess and excrement left behind.
Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): Yesterday I was pleased to host members of the Gypsy, Traveller and Roma communities as they launched Operation Report Hate in this, national hate crime awareness week. We learned that a shocking 98% of GTR respondents to a recent survey had experienced discrimination. Could the hon. Gentleman please tell me what he is doing to raise awareness of such disgusting xenophobic abuse?

Andrew Selous: I condemn all hate crime, whoever it is directed at. Actually, much of the abuse is between Travellers themselves, which I am also very much against.

Shopkeepers are too terrified to report shoplifting by Travellers for fear of retaliation, and it is not just small shops either. The staff in one supermarket are too terrified to apprehend Travellers taking and eating roast chicken from their store without paying. The fear of retaliation is real. I am aware of one business and one individual who have suffered fires after disagreements with local Travellers. There was a recent implied threat to one of my parish councils that there would be less trouble in its village next year if it did not oppose a local Traveller site expansion. We cannot accept that type of blackmail in the planning system.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): This wave of fear and intimidation in our countryside and in communities bordering the countryside is outrageous in 21st-century Britain. It is made even more outrageous by the fact that these individuals’ rights are protected by the Human Rights Act, which this Government have pledged to overturn.

Andrew Selous: What my hon. Friend shows is that the current policy is very bad for community cohesion. I want good community cohesion between everyone in our country.

Residents in another of my villages are terrified that a plot of agricultural land will be bought by Travellers at auction shortly. I do not think they intend to farm it.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way and congratulate him on securing this important debate. Is it not true that many of his constituents and mine feel that there are double standards in the system and that it is far easier for people to claim, rightly or wrongly, that they are a part of this community and to get a different application of the process?

Andrew Selous: My hon. Friend is right. What we want is equality under the law.

Our previous experience is of caravans crashing through hedges on a Friday night and farmland being turned into a residential neighbourhood, with street lighting, pavements and utilities going in, in total contravention of planning law. On 4 February 2014, in my last debate on this issue, the then Minister said that “we need to ensure that everybody is treated equally.”—[Official Report, 4 February 2014; Vol. 575, c. 19WH.]

Allowing that type of behaviour, which settled residents would not be allowed to engage in, shows that the law is not operating equally in this area. My request to the Minister is for his Department to undertake an immediate full-scale review of Gypsy and Traveller policy to ensure better outcomes for Traveller children, as well as greater protection from some of the criminality I have outlined, which affects both settled residents and Travellers themselves.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): On the point about equality, my constituents are very much pressing for equal and fair treatment of settled residents and Travellers in planning. In part, the problem is the lack of a five-year land supply. Where that is the case, we are getting large, semi-permanent Traveller sites in places that would simply not be given permission for permanent housing development. That is unacceptable for residents.

Andrew Selous: I thank my hon. Friend; I will deal with those issues shortly.

I do not have time in this debate to outline every policy suggestion that Central Bedfordshire Council and Bedfordshire police have put to me. I will send the Minister their full submissions and raise the following points now.

The Land Registry is out of date for many Traveller sites, and the owners listed are uncontactable. This makes enforcement very difficult, and we also know there is significant sub-letting of Traveller pitches to non-Travellers. That is one of the reasons why my constituents strongly question whether the Gypsy and Traveller accommodation assessment process is legitimate. How can the Government insist on ever more pitches in an area if many of them are being sub-let to non-Travellers? The Planning Inspectorate even ignores advertisements on “Right Move” for Traveller sites. As I mentioned earlier, many of the caravans sub-let are in a terrible condition. Constituents renting one came to see me to say they had no water and no heating, for example.

The current suite of enforcement powers is designed primarily to deal with breaches among settled residents. The powers available to local authorities in respect of site licensing are intended for Park Home sites and are not fit for purpose when applied to Gypsy and Traveller sites, especially where the land ownership is unknown and there is a mismatch between the planning consent and land ownership, where plot boundaries, land ownership and the planning consent are not configured to a red line on a map.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): My hon. Friend is generous with his time. The problem is that these illegal encampments are tolerated on the basis of apparently insufficient provision for Traveller pitches, yet the requirement for those pitches is being dictated entirely by demand in the locality. That demand, as we see in Somerset, seems to be almost never ending. Surely there must be a limit to the hospitality that the community is expected to extend.

Andrew Selous: That is why I want the Government to take a calm and measured review of the whole situation.

More responsive and bespoke enforcement solutions are needed to allow Travellers and settled residents to be treated equally in cases of breaches. Local authorities also need the option of immediate access to and support from the courts as a first line of recourse in dealing with non-compliance. Land ownership underpins the licensing regime, and without clarity and mandatory registration,
enforcement is unrealistic. There are, for example, conflicts between the Mobile Homes Act 2013 and “A Best Practice Guide for Local Authorities on Enforcement of the New Site Licensing Regime”. There is a lack of clarity on exemptions that makes enforcement unrealistic.

There is no requirement in the August 2015 DCLG planning policy guidance for Traveller sites for sites to be licensed, which leads to many unlicensed sites being given planning permission. Enforcement powers need to be provided that allow councils to ensure that there are adequate services on site in advance of habitation. Otherwise, we have sites with no sanitation and no water, as currently exist in my constituency. Occupation should be prohibited until these are provided. In the past, I am afraid that ministerial statements have not been aligned with legal decisions, which has created unrealistic expectations. It is also not fair or right that the whole community should have to pay for expensive enforcement activity, which is a discretionary function the whole community should have to pay for expensive enforcement activity, which is a discretionary function which the council cannot levy a fee. There must be a financial penalty for undertaking works without permission. The Planning Inspectorate seems to take decisions without any real understanding of the local context, and the fallout from these decisions places an unreasonable burden on both Travellers and settled residents.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I absolutely support my hon. Friend’s call for a review. Does he agree that the extraordinary costs that fall on the local community for cleaning up illegal encampments never seem to be put on the people who cause the damage? Surely the law needs to be improved so that where damage has been caused, car number plates can be traced and fines levied.

Andrew Selous: Absolutely—that would be equality under the law.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): My hon. Friend is indeed generous in allowing interventions. I want to raise the issue of the planning process. Will he ask the Minister during the course of his review to look at the length of time a process of appeals and working through the planning process might take? I have constituents who are in their eighth year of a planning process relating to what was at first an unauthorised site; they are still going through it. It is a sensitive area. In order to get the best balance between the different communities, it is essential to have a good review of the system now.

Andrew Selous: My right hon. Friend is right that justice delayed is justice denied.

The Government have not given planning inspectors the tools they need to act on behalf of the local community. Locally, we have two recent examples of the Planning Inspectorate overturning refusals for Traveller site expansion, even though the council provided strong evidence of advertisements on “Right Move” offering the site for rent, which the inspector fully acknowledged, but ruled as constituting an “enforcement issue” that was not relevant to the appeal. It would also help if vehicles involved in fly-tipping or other criminal activity could be impounded regardless of ownership of the vehicle, which is often difficult to establish.

As for the Gypsy and Traveller accommodation assessment, how can it be right that settled residents have to fill out a census of everyone in their household, when in Central Bedfordshire a large number of Travellers have refused to be interviewed? How can my constituents have confidence that these people are indeed Travellers? One of my constituents has said that her husband travels much more on business than many local Travellers do, and she has a point.

Some local Travellers are extremely wealthy, which is public knowledge following the seizing of considerable sums of cash during recent police operations. Why are very wealthy Travellers provided with more pitches when they have the means to buy land in a residential area where they could keep their caravans, as many settled residents do? On 9 December 2013, in answer to a written parliamentary question from me, the Department stated that “it is difficult to imagine that the possession of substantial assets by Travellers would meet this test”.—[Official Report, 9 December 2013; Vol. 572, c. 40-41W]

The reference was to the public interest test. What checks do planning inspectors undertake on the wealth of travellers, given that answer?

Although I believe that an urgent review of legislation must be undertaken by the Government, I recognise, of course, that local authorities and the police must play their part. Central Bedfordshire council and the Bedfordshire police are determined to do better, and I have had a series of meetings with both the council and the police in recent months. The current position is untenable. It is extremely bad for community cohesion, and unfairly puts much of the blame for the current problems on local authorities and local police forces.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): My constituency, like my hon. Friend’s, has been occupied by a number of unauthorised Traveller camps over the summer, which have caused a large amount of criminal damage and left a great deal of litter. Local residents have had to witness defecation and urination in play areas and playgrounds, and near schools. Does my hon. Friend agree that the police need better and clearer guidance on when it is appropriate to use their section 61 powers?

Andrew Selous: Absolutely. Not only is that unacceptable, but it leads to terribly bad feeling between different groups in society, which we must try to stop.

If we want a country that works for everyone, we must do better, and do it urgently. The last debate that I initiated on this subject took place on 4 February 2014, and I am disappointed that there has been no substantial improvement since then. The Government must act now to bring about peaceful, harmonious communities that get on with each other in a law-abiding manner. I want everyone to have a decent home; perhaps more properly regulated park homes should be provided to help to address the issue. In my constituency alone, 9,500 homes are being built from just two major developments, and the Government appreciate the scale of housing need.

Of course there are decent, law-abiding Travellers. My criticism is aimed not at them, but at the conflicting and unworkable legislation that sets settled residents and Travellers against each other, and hinders the effective enforcement of the law. In my view, a separate planning system for one group in society is no longer justifiable when the outcomes for Travellers of a range of measures are so poor, and there is so much fear and ill feeling among settled residents and Travellers alike.
I do not want to be back here in two years’ time, making the same points. The situation is untenable, has gone on for too long, and the time for action is now.

7.22 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Gavin Barwell): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire (Andrew Selous) on securing the debate. I know that this issue is hugely important to him, to the community that he represents, and, indeed, to many other Members: that is clear from the number of Members who are present for the debate, and the number who have taken part in it. I thank all those who have contributed, but, given the limited time available, I may not be able to address every issue that has been raised.

Let me begin by assuring my hon. Friend that I, too, feel strongly about this matter. My constituency experiences an annual summer charade as groups of Travellers are moved around the borough from one public space to another, at huge cost to the public purse.

As my hon. Friend knows, the Government are committed to a society that works for everyone, and that means fair treatment for Gypsies and Travellers that facilitates their traditional lifestyle. I must make it clear from the outset, however, that it also means a commitment to respecting the interests of all members of the community. Those two commitments should not be mutually exclusive, but I acknowledge that they have been in too many parts of the country, and that that is a source of great concern to the people who send us to the House.

My hon. Friend spoke powerfully about the limited life chances of Gypsies and Travellers in his constituency. His commitment to a compassionate Conservatism is well known throughout the House. The Government recognise the issue that he has raised, and I recognise the concern that he has expressed. As I have said, we want a fair society in which people, whatever their ethnic origin or background, are valued, able to participate fully, and able to realise their potential.

When my hon. Friend last secured an Adjournment debate, back in February 2014, he advocated a change in the planning system to ensure the fairness and equity to which I have already referred. He says that he is disappointed, but in fact a number of the changes he proposed in that debate have since become Government policy. His 2014 speech highlighted a perception that there was a separate planning system for Gypsies and Travellers. Last year the Government published revised planning policy for Traveller sites with the intention of ensuring greater fairness, of strengthening protection for the green belt, which we all value so highly, and of addressing the negative effects of the unauthorised development of land. We have changed the definition of “Gypsies and Travellers” and “travelling showpeople” for planning purposes, and those who have ceased travelling will now have their needs assessed in the same way as any other member of the community. Similarly, the amended duty in the Housing and Planning Act 2016 makes it clear that local authority housing needs assessments cover all those who live and resort to the area, on caravan sites or in houseboats, irrespective of their ethnic identity.

We have also made it clear that planning for present and future need is vital. Both the national planning policy framework and the specific planning policy for Traveller sites state that local planning authorities should plan for these accommodation needs, identifying a five-year supply of deliverable Traveller sites. These themes of fairness and equality for the whole community are at the heart of Government policy, but we are equally clear that fairness also means everyone abiding by the law of this country.

In his speech today, my hon. Friend vividly described the situation in his constituency. Incidents of criminal and antisocial behaviour of the kind he so clearly described have a profound effect on the lives of people that we in this House have a duty to represent. The Government are clear that the law must apply to everyone. The police must treat incidents of lawlessness and antisocial behaviour with concern, and give victims of those offences the support they require. I was particularly disturbed to hear that his constituents felt unable to report what they were experiencing to the authorities, and I shall pass this information on to my colleagues in the Home Office. None of us wants to live in a society where that is the case.

Tackling these problems must be core business for the police and other local agencies. The police already have a wide range of strong powers that enable them to take action. Those powers are discretionary and it is right for the police to decide how and whether to use them, depending on the circumstances of each situation. The Government want to see a multi-agency approach involving the police, councils, landowners and the courts to ensure that these matters are properly dealt with. The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) mentioned hate crime, and it is important to note that the Government are committed to tackling hate crime against Gypsies and Travellers. It is a crime that should have no place in modern Britain. We have published a new hate crime action plan that focuses on reducing these offences, increasing reporting and improving support for victims.

The Government recognise the concern about unauthorised and illegal encampments. As my hon. Friend knows, such encampments can damage the environment, fuel tensions and create great resentment. They also harm the effectiveness of the planning system because they fundamentally undermine public confidence in it. Last year, the Government wrote to council leaders, police and crime commissioners and police chief constables expressing concern that they were not doing enough to stop such encampments. We reissued a summary of the wide-ranging powers to remove unauthorised sites from both public and private land, sending a clear message that powers are available to tackle the problem and should be used swiftly. I know that, despite the actions we have taken, there are deep concerns in my hon. Friend’s constituency and in other parts of the country. He has asked for a review of our existing Gypsy and Traveller policy and associated legislation. I want to assure him and the whole House that there is not a shred of complacency in the Government over this issue.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): A group of Travellers came to the old prison site in my constituency. The Ministry of Justice immediately took legal action,
but it takes three weeks for the whole process to go through. The Travellers knew how long it would take, and they left at the last minute. The only people who made any money out of that were the lawyers. Surely we can do this is less than three weeks.

Gavin Barwell: My hon. Friend reiterates the points that my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire made. There are a number of issues here. There is the speed of access to the courts system and the speed with which decisions are made, but this is also about ensuring that people who behave in this way face consequences for their actions, in order that we do not have the absurd situation of people constantly being moved on from one site to another, at huge expense to the public purse.

To return to the central point my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire made, there is not a shred of complacency in the Government about this issue. We very much welcome the debate he has introduced this evening and will continue to keep all these issues under review.

I want to make two specific points. I am currently looking with the Land Registry at the issue that my hon. Friend raised, and I will come back to him when we have considered it.

I want to say not just to my hon. Friend and colleagues in the Chamber tonight but to anybody who is watching these proceedings that if any police force, local authority or anybody else involved in dealing with these issues has suggestions of additional powers that are required to give the people of this country confidence that the law will be applied consistently to everybody, I am very open to those suggestions.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con) rose—

Mike Wood rose—

Gavin Barwell: Since my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley South (Mike Wood) has already intervened, I will give way to my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois).

Mr Francois: I was encouraged to hear the Minister say at the opening of his remarks that he feels strongly about this issue. Members from across the country have given him multifarious examples tonight of where the system is not working. There remains a strong public perception, which is shared by many Members, that we still have two planning systems: one for the travelling community and one for the settled community. We will not crack this problem until we get through that, and the only Department that can deal with that is the Department for Communities and Local Government. I have heard what he has said, but I ask, as a former DCLG Minister to a current DCLG Minister, will he look favourably on the request for a thorough review, because I think the time has come?

Gavin Barwell: I hope I have given my right hon. Friend assurance tonight that we are constantly reviewing these issues. It is clear to us not only from these issues being raised in the House, of which tonight’s debate is just the latest example, but from the correspondence the Department receives—and he speaks with experience of serving in the Department—that this matter still arouses great concern in many parts of the country.

I am relatively new to this position, but part of what I want to do is to understand to what extent the problem is that the powers that are already in place are not being used as effectively as they could be. However, as I said, if people have suggestions of additional powers that are required to tackle this problem, I am all ears. I want to make sure that we address these issues.

It is the Government’s view that local authorities are best placed to make decisions for their areas, because they have an understanding of the local needs. We have tried to establish clear policies that local authorities should use in determining need and planning effectively for sites, and that should allow them to take swift action on enforcement matters.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South West Bedfordshire for bringing this issue to the Floor of the House. Many Members share the concerns that he has expressed. I recognise the strong feelings people have about this policy area and the tensions it is creating in our communities—tensions that I am sure we all wish to resolve. The Government continue to review these matters. We are firmly committed to ensuring that, through effective planning, genuine partnership working and enforcement action, the system is fair and is perceived to be fair by everyone. I thank him again for raising the debate and look forward to working with him to resolve these matters.

Question put and agreed to.

7.33 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Thursday 13 October 2016

The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Soil Carbon

1. Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): What progress she has made on increasing soil carbon levels by 0.4% each year.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): I do not know whether the Minister has had a chance to look at the Campaign to Protect Rural England’s publication of last August entitled “New model farming: resilience through diversity”. I hope that she will have a look at it and get a chance to see the CPRE’s suggestions for changing the measures of success for farming. This includes looking at diverse outputs from land management such as carbon storage, water retention and landscape character. Could she look at that and respond to the CPRE?

Dr Coffey: My right hon. Friend mentions a report that I have not yet read, but I am sure it will be in my box this weekend for me to digest. My hon. Friend the Minister of State has met the CPRE to discuss the matter. There are opportunities to continue to improve soil health. I visited Honeydale farm in Witney yesterday with the excellent Conservative candidate and we also saw a demonstrator farm. There are some interesting opportunities for modern agriculture and the countryside.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Soil is such an important part of the environment. It is not just a growing medium; it is very much an ecological habitat. Will the Minister kindly comment on whether we could have a soil monitoring scheme? Unless we know the actual state of our soils, we will not know how to deal with them.

Dr Coffey: I was pleased to meet my hon. Friend just the other day to discuss this matter. I have referred to the research that is happening—we are not waiting for the 10-year surveys. The opportunity afforded to us by leaving the European Union will allow the Government to take a holistic approach to improving the environment, including soil health. It will be a bespoke approach for this country, rather than one that is restricted by EU directives.

Food Labelling

2. Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve food labelling.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Andrea Leadsom): Clear food labelling is vital to show consumers exactly what they are buying. We want to promote the Great British food brand as strongly as possible. One of my top priorities is to look at what more can be done to make it easier for consumers to identify our high-quality home-grown food.

Kerry McCarthy: The Prime Minister recently said that, with Brexit looming, we will be able to choose our own methods of food labelling, but is there not a lot more that we could do on country of origin and method of production labelling? While we are still in the European Union, we ought to emulate some of our EU partners.

Andrea Leadsom: I certainly welcome the hon. Lady’s interest in this matter. As she will know, country of origin labelling is already mandatory for unprocessed beef, pork, sheep and goat meat, poultry, fruit and vegetables, olive oil, fish, shellfish, wine and honey. There are many additional voluntary schemes, which we are keen to
support. As she points out, there will be further opportunities, as we leave the EU, to look at what more consumers would like to see from labelling.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): The dairy industry has not really been able to label properly the Great British cheese, butter and milk that is the best in the world. Can we now take this opportunity to ensure that we get the British flag and label on our dairy products?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that point. He and I share an ambition for the strongest possible promotion of Great British food. He will be aware that the majority of dairy and processed meat products are compliant with the industry’s voluntary principles for origin labelling, but we can, of course, always do more, and we are working with the industry to look at what those options are.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her comments so far. In my constituency, many farmers have already diversified—Glastry Farm ice cream, Mash Direct and Willowbrook Foods are examples—but they have found difficulties with labelling. What help has been given to provide clear guidance and support? What initiatives are in place to provide that to new business and to make sure that the labelling is correct?

Andrea Leadsom: As the hon. Gentleman will know, it is an absolute Government priority that food information must not mislead—it must be accurate, clear and easy to understand for the consumer. There are clear guidelines on which foods must carry mandatory information but, as I have already mentioned, a number of food producers already go further on a voluntary basis to try to ensure that they meet consumers’ desires for more information about the food that they eat. I am very proud that the UK has some of the highest standards for food and food traceability in the world.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): One Welsh business in my constituency that understands the importance and power of labelling and branding is Daioni, which exports organic British milk to China, Hong Kong, Vietnam and the Emirates, and has plans to expand further. Will the Secretary of State or one of her Ministers meet Daioni to talk about its plans for international expansion and to tap into its expertise in exporting Great British food?

Andrea Leadsom: I would be absolutely delighted to do that. Exports of organic dairy produce are a huge success for the UK. Later today, I am off to the Great British export truck, which is parked at Stoneleigh, to hear about British exports. I am off to the Paris food fair to promote Great British food next week, and I am off to China next month to do exactly that. I am always very keen to promote the export of Great British food.

Mr Speaker: The excitement in the Secretary of State’s life knows no bounds.

Marine Habitats

3. Rebecca Harris (Castle Point) (Con): What progress the Government are making on putting in place a blue belt to protect marine habitats.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Andrea Leadsom): We have already designated 50 marine conservation zones, 99 special areas of conservation and 102 special protection areas within UK waters, so more than 17% of UK waters are now within marine protected areas. A third tranche of marine conservation zones will be designated in 2018, and I am proud to say that that will help to complete the blue belt around the English coastline.

Rebecca Harris: I thank the Secretary of State for her reply. As well as the important habitats and wildlife that we have in our domestic waters, including those in the Thames estuary, the oceans around some of our overseas territories are home to hundreds of remarkable species. What action, if any, are we taking to protect them as well?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is quite right to raise those wonderful marine habitats. I am delighted to say that marine protected areas were declared around Pitcairn and St Helena in the past month, and work is in train to develop MPAs around Ascension Island and Tristan da Cunha, so the UK is set to double these protected areas to an area the size of India by 2020.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): The right hon. Lady will know that the marine protections that have led to huge improvements in water quality and the conservation of our marine environment are underpinned largely by EU law. Can she guarantee now that, if we leave the EU, the standards that we currently enjoy will not be any less than they are now?

Andrea Leadsom: I can absolutely give the right hon. Gentleman that assurance. As he will know, the Prime Minister has announced that we will nationalise the acquis communautaire. The advantage of the approach is that while there is continuity of legalisation, we also have the opportunity to look at what is right for the UK, instead of the 28 member states. Marine conservation zones derive from UK legislation, and we remain absolutely committed to our ambition of being the first generation to leave the environment in a better place than we found it.

Peter Aldous (Wavenny) (Con): Marine habitats will also be protected by the promotion of sustainable fishing, as practised by the UK inshore fleet and boats that fish out of Lowestoft. Will my right hon. Friend assure the House that she will use the opportunity presented by Brexit to secure a better deal for under-10 metre boats?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend may be aware that we have already moved some quota to the under-10 metre boats, and it is absolutely our intention, as we leave the EU, to seek a good deal for every part of our great British food, farming and fishing sector. Our fishermen do a fabulous job; we absolutely support them and are totally focused on what we can do to create a better, more sustainable fishing industry.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Minister agree that while marine conservation is fine—Labour Members support it wholeheartedly—we have to stop polluting the marine environment with the waste that we pour into it, all over the world? We need the EU and global intervention to stop the horrendous pollution of marine life throughout the world.
Andrea Leadsom: Marine conservation zones are not just fine; they are absolutely superb. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman shares that assessment. I can give him, as a good example, the work that we did just last month to ban microbeads in personal cosmetics and so on. I pay tribute to hon. Members on both sides of the Chamber who have been fighting for that. We are putting that into action, and that is an example of the UK’s commitment to much more protection for our marine environment.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Further to the Secretary of State’s answer to the hon. Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous), may I encourage the Secretary of State, and indeed the Minister of State, who has responsibility for fisheries, to engage with all sectors of the fishing industry when designing protections for marine habitats? If those habitats are to be effective, that is absolutely essential. The Minister of State knows that because he has a good record in this regard. Would the Secretary of State, or perhaps the Minister, be prepared to meet a delegation that I will bring from the Northern Isles, who are full of good ideas about what can be done?

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman is right to raise the importance of this sector in Scotland. We would be delighted to meet him. In fact, there are already a number of levels of engagement with analysing the opportunities that will arise from our leaving the EU. We will be very happy, keen and enthusiastic to meet his delegation.

Bovine TB

4. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): How many (a) cattle have been slaughtered and (b) badgers have been culled as a result of efforts to prevent the spread of bovine tuberculosis since 2010. [906542]

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): Between the start of 2010 and the end of 2015, some 160,393 cattle were slaughtered and 3,961 badgers were removed under licence in England to prevent the spread of bovine TB. We will publish figures for 2016 in due course.

Mr Hollobone: The loss of animal life as a result of trying to prevent this disease is absolutely horrendous. The Government are in the early years of a 25-year strategy to eliminate bovine TB. When does the Minister expect the low-risk area to be declared free of bovine TB?

George Eustice: We expect to have the low-risk area declared officially TB-free in the next four to five years—probably by the end of this Parliament. My hon. Friend makes a good point: this is a long haul. TB is a difficult disease to fight; it is slow-growing and insidious. That is why our strategy is very broad. The badger cull is one element, but we are doing many other things, including vaccination and putting in place cattle movement controls.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Not one single badger was culled in Wales due to the actions of the Welsh Government in supporting vaccination, but they face the same problem as authorities in England: a shortage of the vaccine. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that we can maximise the use of vaccines in England and Wales?

George Eustice: I ensured that we continued to have vaccine available for important trial work that we are doing, specifically on developing an oral vaccine that we could deploy on badgers, which could give us an exit strategy from culls, once that was complete. However, the right hon. Gentleman is right: the World Health Organisation has asked people to prioritise use of the available vaccine on humans. It is worth noting that the dose needed for a badger is sometimes 10 times higher than that for an infant, so we have to be careful about how we use the vaccine. That is why we have suspended the use of vaccines for the time being.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): Minister, will we make sure that we work with all the devolved Governments, and the Irish, and learn from their expertise, so that we can know what, apart from badgers, may be carrying the disease, so that we can continually learn from each other, and so that we can deal with the problem really effectively?

George Eustice: Yes. The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. The chief veterinary officers in all the devolved Administrations work closely with our chief veterinary officer and veterinary teams to share experience and learn lessons. We know that Northern Ireland is using a “trap, vaccinate and remove” strategy, and the strategy in Wales is slightly different from ours in England. We are pursuing a wide range of strategies and do what we can to share evidence between the Administrations.

Mary Glindon (North Tyneside) (Lab): Tragically, the social costs of bovine TB fall largely on the farming community, but the enormous financial burden is shared with the taxpayer. Given that DEFRA has stated that there is considerable uncertainty in the value-for-money figures for the new cull, how will the Minister justify them to the general public?

George Eustice: I welcome the hon. Lady to her post. She and I served on the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee for a number of years in the previous Parliament, so she has had a good grounding for the role that she takes on. The disease is costing us £100 million a year to fight. Doing nothing is not an option; we cannot put our head in the sand. That is why we need to pursue a broad comprehensive strategy. There is no evidence that any country in the world has managed to eradicate bovine TB without also tackling the reservoir of the disease in the wildlife population.

Rural Payments Agency

5. Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): What recent assessment she has made of the efficiency of the Rural Payments Agency in making basic farm payments on time. [906544]

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): We are expecting payments under the 2016 basic payment scheme to be considerably improved from last year’s. The Rural Payments Agency received more than 86,500 BPS applications for
Mr Robertson: The Minister will be aware that this is not a new problem; it has been going on for a long time. Non-payment or even partial payment causes a great deal of hardship to farmers. Given that the situation has been going on for so long, what more can he do to make sure that there is an improvement in the forthcoming year?

George Eustice: As my hon. Friend knows, we had tremendous challenges in year 1. This was an incredibly complex common agricultural policy with all sorts of additional auditing and recording requirements, and which carried with it complexity and caused problems for payment agencies right across the European Union. On his question about what we are doing to improve things, now that we have gone through last year’s difficult task of getting all the data on to the computer system, and now that we have 80% of claimants applying online, we believe that we are in a good position for the coming year because all the difficult work was done last year.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): When the chief executive of the Rural Payments Agency came to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee earlier this year, he made a commitment to pay the majority of claims by 1 December, not 90% by the end of December. Four weeks is a long time for a farmer. Will the RPA make the majority of those payments at the beginning of the month?

George Eustice: The commitment was to pay 90% by the end of December. That has gone into the business plan for the RPA and is one of the targets that it is working to. The payment window does not open until early in December, but clearly we will be trying to pay, as we always do, as many farmers as quickly as possible.

Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): Yes, the chief executive of the Rural Payments Agency has appeared in front of us several times at the EFRA Committee and promised to make payments by certain dates. There are cross-border farmers in my constituency and they are always at the back of the queue. Some of them were paid only last month, well outside the payment window. What more can my hon. Friend do to make sure that that does not recur?

George Eustice: With the complexity of the new system, there are always issues relating to cross-border claims, where farms have some of their holding in one Administration and some in the other. It is important that we share information as quickly as possible. We had a particular problem on the Scottish borders because Scotland had far deeper problems with managing the scheme than we had in England, and getting the data to make those payments was particularly challenging. I am aware that there were issues in Wales as well, and we will do all that we can to ensure that we do not encounter such problems in future.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Thousands of farmers have been pushed into acute financial hardship, anxiety or stress owing to the failure of the Rural Payments Agency. In the past year, 62% of payments were very late and many have still not been paid. Now the Government are planning further delays of payment, which is unacceptable. Why will not the Minister recruit the staff needed to pay everyone all they are owed by this Christmas and, in the interim, institute bridging loans?

George Eustice: We are not planning to cause any further delays, as I made clear. Last year when we had a difficulty we recruited some 600 additional people to process the claims and pay them as soon as possible. As I have already said, this year we are in a better position. We have 80% of claimants applying online and we have committed to pay at least 90% of claims by the end of December. In any normal year there will always be some cases that are incredibly complex, such as those put forward by the National Trust, whose large, complex claims always take longer to process.

Food Labelling

6. Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What plans has she to promote (a) local and (b) British produce through food labelling.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Andrea Leadsom): It is fantastic that local food producers are developing labelling to highlight local food provenance, which really adds value to their products for the regional and tourist markets. As I said earlier, we want to do everything we can really to promote the British food brand. I am firmly committed to protecting the UK’s iconic food and drink products.

Chi Onwurah: Mr Speaker, you might think of Newcastle upon Tyne Central as an urban constituency, but actually we produce excellent beef from the lucky cattle that graze the nutritious grass on the stunning Town Moor. We are developing Toon Beef labels, but labelling generally needs to be better if consumers are to make informed choices. What practical measures is she taking to ensure that the voluntary and mandatory requirements she spoke of reflect regional origin and animal welfare?

Andrea Leadsom: We are very proud that the UK has some of the highest animal welfare standards in the world, the best food traceability and the best food safety. The hon. Lady is exactly right to point out the importance of labelling. We are doing everything we can. There is a lot of mandatory labelling, as she will be aware, but we also do a lot of work with businesses that want to label voluntarily, particularly for our iconic food products. I did a bit of research and found north-east Craster kippers, Wylam golden ale and other iconic names. I encourage her to apply for protected name status wherever possible, and we intend to support that.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): This week is Seafood Week. Will my right hon. Friend outline what her Department has done to promote Seafood Week? I urge her to return to Cleethorpes so that we can have a less rushed plate of fish and chips than we had on her last visit.

Andrea Leadsom: I am always delighted to visit my hon. Friend’s constituency, because he always has something exciting in store for me. During Seafood Week we have
established a working group with different seafood organisations. We are absolutely committed to promoting it, as we are with all our great British food. As I have mentioned, I am off to the Paris food exhibition and the China food exhibition to see what more we can do for our great British seafood and other food.

Department for Exiting the European Union

7. Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): What support her Department is providing to the work of the Department for Exiting the European Union. [906547]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Andrea Leadsom): As he was one of my great Northamptonshire colleagues during the EU referendum campaign, I am pleased to tell my hon. Friend that my Department is doing all it can to support DEEU on policy development and stakeholder engagement right across DEFRA’s portfolio. I will shortly meet my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union to discuss the enormous opportunities that EU exit presents for our food, farming and fishing sectors.

Mr Bone: Does the Secretary of State agree that one of the Brexit dividends is that we can take the money that the EU currently gives to our farmers and give it out more fairly and efficiently after we have left the EU?

[ Interruption. ]

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is exactly right. The fact is that the money we get from the EU was British taxpayers’ money in the first place. The first thing I did on joining the Department was to agree with the Treasury that the current levels of farming and environment support should remain until 2020 to give our farmers continuity. [ Interruption. ] Of course, once we have left the EU we can ensure that our policies deliver for farmers while improving the environment. We want to work closely with industry stakeholder groups and the public to ensure that our policies are simple, good value for the taxpayer and free from the unnecessary constraints that we see today.

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), who is an extremely senior and cerebral Member of the House, keeps chuntering from a sedentary position about buried money—just in case colleagues had not heard what he was chuntering about. It would be good if he ceased chuntering.

11. [906552] Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Improvements to air quality and action to tackle road transport pollution in this country have been driven by EU legislation and the enforcement mechanisms that underpin them. In September the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), alongside the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker), was asked seven times by the Environmental Audit Committee whether the Government would retain EU air quality limits following exit from the EU, but she failed to give that commitment. Weeks later, why has she still not confirmed that EU air quality limits will be retained or improved, or explained how they will be enforced, which is essential to cutting premature deaths?

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely share the hon. Lady’s desire to see clean air—nothing could be more important. We are doing absolutely everything we can, and we will continue to be committed. As the Prime Minister has said, we will be nationalising the acquis communautaire, so the EU legislation will become UK law. Just today, as the hon. Lady may be aware, we have announced our clean air zone consultation.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): Including for Nottingham.

Andrea Leadsom: Indeed, as my hon. Friend points out, a clean air zone in Nottingham—in the Nottingham South. We are doing that to try to ensure that we make some real, serious progress towards cleaner air and a clean and healthy environment for all.

Mr Speaker: I call Mrs Caroline Spelman.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): Brexit creates an opportunity to put agriculture on a more sustainable footing, but can the Secretary of State reassure the House that Brexit will not change the international leadership the UK has provided on sustainable development?

Mr Speaker: I apologise: I should have referred to the right hon. Lady properly—Dame Caroline Spelman.

Andrea Leadsom: Absolutely, Mr Speaker—Dame. I can totally give my right hon. Friend that reassurance. The UK, in leaving the EU, is absolutely determined to be more globally focused and, at home, to create sustainable policies that will make our food production and our environment more sustainable and better for our people and our economy. At the same time, we are determined to maintain and enhance our global leadership role in promoting sustainability for everyone in this world.

Calum Kerr (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (SNP): While the Scottish National party welcomes the Secretary of State’s commitment to maintaining pillar one EU funding until 2020, she should be aware that Scotland has some of the lowest payments in the EU; that is why the UK was given millions of euros in convergence funding. So, with the same enthusiasm she has demonstrated with every question today, will she deliver on her commitment to have this in place by the end of the year?

Andrea Leadsom: I welcome the hon. Gentleman to his place, and I look forward to many happy days of fruitful discussions with him in the weeks and months ahead. I can absolutely tell him that we will be reviewing that by the end of this year. We look forward to meeting him and Members of the Scottish Parliament to discuss the interests of Scotland. We have a huge policy review; there are enormous opportunities, and I look forward to Scotland being delighted at the opportunities presented by Brexit.
Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): May I welcome the Secretary of State to her place? I am sure she has had discussions with the Department for Exiting the European Union about the impact of the 16% fall in the value of the pound since the referendum outcome. In the light of that, what financial drivers to replace the common agricultural policy will she prioritise, with the mutual support of that Department, to enable farmers to plan now for the future and to remain productive while making the necessary progress on environmental measures?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her remarks, and I also look forward to working with her. May I also welcome all her colleagues to their places? A number of them I have worked with over a period of time on energy matters, with great, fruitful results, so I look forward to a constructive relationship. In answer to her specific question, those are exactly the issues we are now looking at—the opportunities for revising the support we give our food and farm producers, to make sure we can grow more, sell more and export more great British food. It will take time to properly evaluate what that policy set should be, but I hope shortly to consult broadly. I have already had informal consultations, and I will be working closely with the industry.

Dolphin Hunting

8. Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on UK representations made to the Japanese government on the Taiji dolphin hunt. [906548]

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): DEFRA leads on the conservation and management of whales and dolphins, keeping in close contact with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and the UK has always taken a leading position on promoting conservation. The Government raise their opposition to Japan’s hunting of whales and dolphins at every appropriate opportunity. Most recently, I raised this issue with the Japanese Fisheries Minister during an official visit to Japan in April this year.

Henry Smith: The international whaling ban has been extremely successful for many decades, but the minority of countries that do not respect it are looking to erode it. What further steps will my hon. Friend take to ensure that it is rigorously enforced?

George Eustice: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. The UK strongly supports the global moratorium on commercial whaling and continues at every appropriate opportunity to call on all whaling nations to cease their whaling activities. I recently plan to attend the International Whaling Commission meeting in Slovenia later this year, when we will reiterate our opposition to commercial and scientific permit whaling and work constructively with other like-minded countries to secure the correct outcomes.

Topical Questions

T1. [906569]Mr Stephen Hepburn (Jarrow) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Andrea Leadsom): Following the referendum, we are working closely with all those with an interest in food, farming and the environment to seize the superb opportunities we now have to develop policies specific to the needs of the UK. Alongside this, we continue to prepare for winter weather by testing our response capability, quadrupling the amount of mobile flood defences and making our critical infrastructure more resilient.

Mr Hepburn: The Secretary of State seems such a nice lady, so I do not know what enjoyment she can take from the thought of a fox being torn apart. May I take it from the silence of her and her Department lately that she has dropped the idea of having a vote in this House on foxhunting?

Andrea Leadsom: My mum says my sisters are much nicer than me, but, that apart, my view is very simple. Like my predecessor and her predecessor before her, I remain committed to the Conservative manifesto promise that we will have a free vote in Parliament on a repeal of the Hunting Act 2004.

Mr Speaker: I am shocked by the Secretary of State’s mother’s observations. I have a vivid imagination, but I find that utterly inconceivable.

T4. [906572]Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): The Secretary of State will be aware that consent has been given for the first horizontal shale gas site at Preston New Road in my constituency. Will she assure me that the Environment Agency will conduct immediate on-the-spot inspections, and that many of them will be unannounced? What powers does the Environment Agency have to close down a site if it finds it to be in breach of regulations?

Andrea Leadsom: I am very happy to reassure my hon. Friend that we have a robust regulatory framework in place to ensure that shale exploration is carried out in a safe, sustainable and environmentally sound manner. The Environment Agency can undertake announced and unannounced inspections, and if there is any breach of a permit condition or a serious risk to people or the environment, it can take a number of enforcement actions, including the immediate ceasing of operations.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): The damage caused by storms last winter cost about £5 billion. Thousands of homes and businesses were flooded and there was significant damage to roads and bridges. The then Prime Minister said that “money is no object”, but councils are still waiting. Allerdale, for example, is owed almost £220,000. How many councils are still waiting for the promised funds, and why?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I welcome the hon. Lady to her place. We both represent coastal communities and we share the issue of flooding.
She raises an important point. She will be aware of the Government’s commitment to spend £2.5 billion over six years, which has given the Environment Agency long-term funding. I will have to ask my hon. Friend in the Department for Communities and Local Government about her specific point on the recovery work and then write to her, but we are continuing to invest in such schemes, including in Cumbria, as she will be aware.

Dr Coffey: I am pleased to report that woodland cover in England is at its highest since the 14th century—well before I was born—and we are committed to growing it even further by planting another 11 million trees over the course of this Parliament. The second phase of applications for the woodland creation planning grant has opened: the first phase generated plans for over 1,000 hectares of woodland. I ask hon. Members to write to her, but we are continuing to invest in such schemes, including in Cumbria, as she will be aware.

Dr Coffey: I commend the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central for standing up for rural residents, but I assure her that we are prepared to do that ourselves. The Government are committed to the universal service obligation of 10 megabits by the end of the decade. It is an ambitious programme that we will fulfil.

The common fisheries policy is among the very worst aspects of our membership of the European Union. Our waters have been invaded by European trawlers and there has been vast overfishing. What plans do the Government have to repatriate Britain’s territorial fishing waters and revive the great British fishing industry?

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): My hon. Friend makes an important point. As we leave the European Union, there are opportunities to manage our fisheries differently. We will work with colleagues in the Department for Exiting the European Union on these matters, as we develop a negotiating position. He may be aware that under the UN convention on the law of the sea, it is accepted that we would have an exclusive economic zone going out to 200 nautical miles or the median line. That will be the starting point for discussions.

Mr Speaker: I would call the right hon. Gentleman who is intently studying his iPad, but as he does not seem keen to engage we will leave him out for now. I am giving him due notice—he had his opportunity.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): When the former Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the current Lord Chancellor, visited my constituency and the Environment Agency carried out £500,000-worth of maintenance work in Bury to remove gravel, debris and blockages. A £1.5-million flood defence scheme was completed in November 2014, providing better protection for 164 homes and businesses in the Stubbins area of Bury. I will, of course, look into the point my hon. Friend raises about people who are still suffering from the damage done by last winter’s floods.

Dr Coffey: I have to ask my hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson) to ensure that EU funding to protect the Welsh environment is replaced pound for pound by the UK Government?

George Eustice: The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to know that I met Lesley Griffiths last week to discuss these issues, and the Secretary of State plans to meet her shortly. We intend to work very closely with all the devolved Administrations as we devise a new agriculture policy for after we leave the European Union. We recognise the importance of that to every part of the UK and will engage every part of the UK.

Mr Speaker: I would call the right hon. Gentleman.
constituency in May, she visited the Orwell food enterprise zone and heard about the skills challenges faced by local small and medium-sized businesses in the food sector. She said that the Government were considering a proposal to allow large food businesses to share their apprenticeship levy with the local supply chain to encourage local buying of food and local skills. Has there been any progress on that?

George Eustice: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I have been arguing for that to happen for some time, because some large food producers are caught by the levy but would rather use it further up their supply chain. In August, the Department for Education published proposals for funding apprenticeships in England from May 2017, which propose that from 2018, employers will be able to transfer up to 10% of their levy funds in any year to another employer with a digital account. That deals with this issue.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): Marine habitats are a matter of real concern to my constituents, who are very concerned about the threat of underground coal gasification in the Dee estuary, so I welcome the Secretary of State’s earlier response on marine protected areas but would like to push her further on this point. Over the past two Parliaments the Government have created only 50 marine protected areas when their own advisers have recommended 127. Will she confirm that in the third tranche that she alluded to we will reach the recommended 127?

Dr Thérèse Coffey: The original 127 sites were cited, but we have to follow the scientific evidence. That is the basis of this process. It is not about setting arbitrary targets but about making sure that we have a scientifically robust blue belt. That is what we will continue to do with the next phase of consultation.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): Several farmers in my constituency of Louth and Horncastle have complained to me that the Rural Payments Agency has made mistakes in the land maps that determine how much they are paid. Will my hon. Friend help me to address these real concerns about food safety and exports?

George Eustice: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. He will be aware that the UK is the world leader on getting out the agenda that we need to reduce our use of antibiotics in agriculture and tackle the problem of antimicrobial resistance. The Government have a strategy that sets targets for reductions in the use of antibiotics in some livestock sectors. We are also investing in research to support other approaches to husbandry that reduce the need for antibiotic use. This is an important agenda that the Government take very seriously.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

1. Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Whether the Church of England has assessed the potential effect of changes to the cap on faith-based admissions on Church schools.

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): The Church has 4,700 primary and secondary schools that seek to provide excellent education to 1 million pupils each year. These are not faith schools for the faithful but Church schools for the whole community, and the Church does not propose to change that. The 50% cap applies only to new free schools that are oversubscribed. The majority of our new free schools, like many of our existing schools, do not have any faith-based oversubscription criteria.

Chi Onwurah: I welcome that answer. Newcastle is a city of diverse, strong and generally united and mutually respectful communities, and our faith communities make an important contribution. The rise of hate crime since the referendum emphasises the importance of teaching that we have more in common. Mrs Davison, the head of St Cuthbert’s in Newcastle, tells me that that school’s mix of students from varying faiths and none assists inclusivity and enrichment, and ensures that the school is representative of the community. Do the commissioners agree that the proposed changes threaten the benefits of inclusivity at this crucial time?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I share completely the hon. Lady’s concerns about the rise in hate crime following the referendum. Every Member in this House is concerned about that. I point her to what the Secretary of State for Education herself said about the education that Church schools provide:

“They have an ethos and a level of academic attainment that we are trying to achieve more broadly across the whole system.”—[Official Report, 10 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 22.]

Church schools provide education for the community as a whole, not just those who go to church.

2. Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): What assessment has she made of the effect on relations between the Anglican and Catholic Churches of the Archbishop of Canterbury’s visit to Assisi and Rome in October 2016.

[906558]
Dame Caroline Spelman: The Archbishop of Canterbury recently visited Assisi and Rome to deepen and strengthen relationships with His Holiness Pope Francis, and the relationship between the worldwide Anglican communion and the Roman Catholic Church. That visit coincided with the 50th anniversary of the founding of the Anglican centre in Rome, which was itself the beginning of a process of healing and reconciliation.

Victoria Prentis: I thank the right hon. Lady for her answer, but if I may, I will seamlessly move to relations with the Orthodox Church. Does she agree that the visit of Patriarch Kirill in the next week give us an opportunity to build bridges with the Orthodox Church at a time when our relationship with Moscow is perhaps not all it should be?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The hon. Lady is right. The Archbishop of Canterbury believes that deeper relations between all Christian Churches is a contribution to the peace that we all desire in such turbulent times. The visit by the Patriarch of Moscow and all Rus’ is an opportunity not only to celebrate the 300 years of Russian Orthodox worship in London, but no doubt to discuss current affairs.

Community Relations

3. Chris Davies (Brecon and Radnorshire) (Con): What steps the Church of England has taken to build community relations and to counter extremism. [906559]

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church of England, through its presence in every community and its large network of schools, is an enormous asset in building community relations. As we have just discussed, Church of England schools play a leading role in value-based education. That building of trust, awareness and community is an important bulwark against the spread of extremism.

Chris Davies: With extremism being such a great threat to the UK, what plans does the Church of England education office have to expand its “What if Learning” approach, which was recently successfully piloted in more than 20 schools?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church promotes a number of schemes around the country to counter extremism and improve relations. The “What if Learning” scheme in schools has proved to be a good example of how we can help children from a very young age to understand the important principles of our society and the tolerance that we need to show to others of different faiths and points of view. We must also think about how we reach adults. I commend two schemes: the Church’s Living Well Together initiative, and the Near Neighbours initiative. I should like to take this opportunity to invite colleagues to hear more about those initiatives on 23 November at 4 pm, after the autumn statement, in the Jubilee Room.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Recent research on extremism suggests that a sense of humiliation, particularly among traumatised communities and individuals, is a major driver of extremism. Are the Church Commissioners aware of the need to look at bullying and traumatisation?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The hon. Lady is right that humiliation is a strong emotion that can lead to people taking strong positions and actions as a consequence. The Church is not just looking at that, but has rolled out those important initiatives. I commend to her initiatives such as Near Neighbours, funding for which came from the Department for Communities and Local Government, which demonstrated that, in our cities, there is a great opportunity to bridge the gap and speak into the humiliation that some people feel.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Does the right hon. Lady agree that it is imperative that those of other faiths are not left isolated in our communities, and that more help should be offered to facilitate community events to establish relationships that span the divides of religion?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The hon. Gentleman can speak with feeling on that subject. One of the most important things that the Christian denominations can do is work together to reach across to people of other faith, with whom we have a great deal in common, and defuse some of the misrepresentations of those faiths, so that the wider secular aspects of society know that we can speak and live in harmony.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The hon. Member for South West Devon, representing the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked

Electoral Fraud

4.. Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What assessment the Electoral Commission has made of the implications for its policies of the findings of “Securing the ballot: Report of Sir Eric Pickles’ review into electoral fraud”, published in August 2016. [906560]

Mr Gary Streeter (South West Devon): The Electoral Commission welcomed in August the publication of the Pickles report and recommendations on electoral fraud, particularly his support for the commission’s recommendations that the Government should consider introducing voter ID at polling stations in Great Britain. The commission will submit its response shortly to the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore), who is responsible for constitutional matters.

Sir Desmond Swayne: What can be done to ensure that staff at polling stations observe and enforce the rule that voters are accompanied to the polling booth only if they are blind or otherwise unable to make their mark?

Mr Streeter: There is Electoral Commission guidance for electoral registration officers on this very point. My right hon. Friend raises an important point. That should not happen, but I will refer his concerns to the Electoral Commission to see whether the guidance needs to be clarified or made more robust. I am grateful to him for raising it.
Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): My hon. Friend knows that I have had long-standing serious concerns about electoral fraud in some parts of Bradford. I particularly welcome what he says about ID at polling stations. When might we expect the first elections to take place where that is the rule?

Mr Streeter: I am delighted to say that that is not a matter for the Electoral Commission, which has recommended this measure strongly since 2014. It is now a matter for the Government and this House to introduce this more robust new provision.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): If someone wants to open a bank account, they have to produce all manner of identities. Yet to do the most important thing we can in our democracy, which is to vote, they do not have to produce ID. Can we expect to see that change?

Mr Streeter: I am delighted that my hon. Friend supports the Electoral Commission’s recommendation that registration and identification should be introduced at polling stations. It is now for the Government to respond.

Mr Speaker: I call Barry Sheerman. Where is the fella? He has beetled out of the Chamber. That is very unlike the hon. Gentleman. I call Mr David Hanson.

**CHURCH COMMISSIONERS**

_The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—_

**Refugee Resettlement**

6. **Mr David Hanson** (Delyn) (Lab): What steps the Church of England is taking to assist with refugee resettlement in the UK.

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): The Church of England is working on two main levels to assist refugees being resettled under the vulnerable person relocation scheme. The Home Secretary went to Lambeth Palace on 19 July to launch the new scheme for community sponsorship, which demonstrates the importance the Church attaches to action as well as words.

Mr Hanson: The Church nationally has been very active on refugees. Parishes such as Holywell in my constituency have been very supportive and active, too. The Home Secretary has now apparently made a commitment to accept child refugees to the United Kingdom. What steps can the Church take to help with resettlement, particularly in the field of fostering?

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church has reached out through its parishes to provide practical help—clothing, food and English language lessons—for the refugees in our midst. To be practical about expediting reuniting children with their families in the UK, the Archbishop of Canterbury has sent a youth worker to Calais. There is a call in all our parishes for more foster parents, so that unaccompanied asylum-seeking children can have a warm welcome and a safe home in our country.

LGBT Christians: Pastoral Care

7. **Susan Elan Jones** (Clwyd South) (Lab): What discussions the Church Commissioners have had with the Church of England on the pastoral care of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Christians.

Dame Caroline Spelman: I am unable to answer on the work of the Church in Wales, but the chaplaincy there recently launched in the diocese of St Asaph. It is true that the Church of England is operating a similar number of smaller scale projects. The best example I can think of is in Manchester, where a monthly communion service operates in some parishes specifically for the LGBT community.

Susan Elan Jones: I am delighted that, although the Church Commissioners’ writ does not run in the Church in Wales—we are not seeking to change that—the right hon. Lady has already noticed the excellent work of the diocese of St Asaph LGBT chaplaincy. Does she agree that now is the time for those of us who are Christian but not of the LGBT community to give more careful consideration to these issues?

Dame Caroline Spelman: Yes, absolutely. It is completely in line with the policy of the Church of England. The House of Bishops has consistently encouraged the clergy to offer appropriate pastoral support, including informal prayer with LGBT people, Christians and others. I think that that injunction is on us all.

Scrooby Church

8. **John Mann** (Bassetlaw) (Lab): When the Church Commissioners plan to visit Scrooby Church.

Dame Caroline Spelman: The hon. Gentleman knows very well that I need no excuse to visit his beautiful constituency, having fought the election there in 1992. I was back there this summer visiting friends at Hodsock Priory, which I know he is aware of. The important and beautiful church at Scrooby is home to the festival that will celebrate the 400th anniversary of the Pilgrim Fathers. I have looked into the needs that it may have. I suggest we work together to ensure that the event is a great success.

John Mann: The right hon. Lady is very welcome to re-tread the streets of Scrooby, and if she does, she might care to bring one of the many descendants of the pilgrims with her. If, with her good contacts, she could arrange it, the most popular would probably be Mr Richard Gere.

Dame Caroline Spelman: If only! I know that what the hon. Gentleman is looking for specifically from the Church Commissioners is some assistance with the improvement to the facilities. I have looked into this question. The church hall has facilities to ensure that the event is a success, but perhaps if he encourages the church wardens to contact me or Church House, we can make sure the event is a great success, with or without a celebrity attendance.
Priests: Same-sex Marriage

9. Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): What the policy of the Church of England is on priests in same-sex marriages; and if she will make a statement. [906567]

Dame Caroline Spelman: I suspect the right hon. Gentleman wants to ask me, as he did before, about a specific case, but the case of Canon Pemberton is still pending a judgment from his appeal, so I am afraid I will be unable to comment on it in any detail. The Pilling report was commissioned by the Church of England at the start of a shared conversation about sexuality, which reached its conclusion at the Synod in July. The House of Bishops has asked for a summary to be created by the bishops reference group.

Mr Bradshaw: But with a growing number of priests, including now one bishop, deciding commendably to be open about their sexual orientation, and indeed their marital status, why is the Church of England spending our money pursuing a legal case against Canon Jeremy Pemberton simply because he is married?

Dame Caroline Spelman: Obviously the Church is on a journey with this issue, as many of us have been, but I would gently point out to the right hon. Gentleman that the Church was not the plaintiff. Canon Pemberton was the plaintiff and therefore the Church had to defend itself in a legal process. The initial case was lost and now Canon Pemberton has sought to appeal. There will be significant costs attached to that, but the Church did not initiate those legal proceedings.

Cathedral Repairs

10. Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Whether the Church of England has made an assessment of the effect of the first world war centenary cathedral repairs fund on the fabric of English cathedrals. [906568]

Dame Caroline Spelman: Last month I attended, alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant), a service of thanksgiving for the world war one centenary cathedral repairs fund at Lichfield. Without the generosity of my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), it would not have been possible to effect the kind of repairs that many of our cathedrals have required just to remain open.

Pauline Latham: Derby cathedral is such an important asset to the city, bringing visitors and businesses to the wider region. Without the financial support of the world war one cathedral fund, the cathedral would potentially have faced closure to the public, due to the condition of the electrics and the roof. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating all the trades, craftspeople and apprentices who have worked to keep the cathedral open and to secure its future for at least the next 100 years? It is much improved.

Dame Caroline Spelman: I would be very happy to join my hon. Friend in congratulating them on all that remarkable work. In fact, Derby cathedral has received the third highest amount of world war one grant funding to date—nearly £1.4 million—to effect, as she said, roof repairs and completely refurbish the interior. There is no question but that these repairs have created jobs for skilled craftsmen and ensured a sustainable future for our cathedrals.
Business of the House

10.33 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Lidington): The business for next week is as follows:

Monday 17 October—Second Reading of the Savings (Government Contributions) Bill.

Tuesday 18 October—Debate on the BBC on a Government motion.

Wednesday 19 October—Opposition day (9th allotted day). There will be a debate on an SNP motion, subject to be announced.

Thursday 20 October—Debate on a motion on BHS, followed by a general debate on industrial strategy. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 21 October—Private Members’ Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 24 October will include:

Monday 24 October—Second Reading of the Health Services Medical Supplies (Costs) Bill.

Tuesday 25 October—Opposition day (10th allotted day). There will be a debate on an Opposition motion, subject to be announced.

Wednesday 26 October—Consideration of Lords amendments.

Thursday 27 October—Business to be nominated by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 28 October—Private Members’ Bills.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for October and early November will be:

Monday 17 October—Debate on e-petitions relating to the UK’s exit from the European Union.

Tuesday 20 October—Debate on the Education Committee reports on mental health and well-being of looked-after children and on social work reform, followed by a general debate on National Arthritis Week 2016.

Monday 24 October—Debate on an e-petition relating to the local government pension scheme.

Thursday 27 October—Debate on the Defence Committee reports on defence expenditure and the use of Lariam for military personnel.

Monday 31 October—Debate on an e-petition relating to driven grouse shooting.

Thursday 3 November—General debate on the future of the steel industry.

Valerie Vaz: I thank the Leader of the House for his warm welcome and for the time he took to speak to me about this role. I also thank my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn), for all his hard work in the two jobs that he undertook.

It is the first week back, and it has been a bad week for the Government. On Tuesday, the Prime Minister’s honeymoon period, most of which was in the Swiss Alps in the recess, came to an end as she faced her first Government defeat in the other place, which voted through new laws to compensate phone-hacking victims. Quite rightly in the age of legal aid cutbacks, victims should have access to justice and protected costs.

May we have a debate to clarify the policy of the Home Secretary’s proposals for firms to provide a list of foreign workers whom they employ? The Prime Minister said at Prime Minister’s Question Time that that was not what was said, so why did more than 100 business leaders write an open letter to the Home Secretary, calling for the idea to be abandoned, saying that foreign workers should be “celebrated not demonised”? The Government may have back-tracked on the policy, just a week after it was outlined, but we need clarification that it is obsolete. If the Leader of the House went back to his alma mater, the University of Cambridge, he would know that the new Vice-Chancellor is, in fact, Canadian, so would he have to be reported to the Home Secretary? It is the anniversary of the battle of Hastings on Friday—it took place 950 years ago—so this reversal could be seen as one in the eye for the Home Secretary.

At the Conservatives’ annual conference, the Chancellor announced a U-turn on six years of Government policy. You will know, Mr Speaker, that at the time of the party conference, the pound fell—and it is still falling. Since last week, we have seen a loss of 6% against the dollar—usually a headline associated with the Labour party. The Chancellor also said that he is cancelling the plan of the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne) to balance the nation’s books by 2020. Instead, the Government will invest their way out of the deficit and would now borrow to invest. That sounds remarkably like the Opposition’s policy. May we have statement immediately, before the autumn statement in November, on what is being done at the Treasury on the state of the pound?

So this Government are not the Government of business, not the Government of sound fiscal policy and not the Government of the vulnerable. The new Secretary of State for Work and Pensions now says that people with severe, lifelong conditions will no longer face those humiliating six-monthly reassessments—but only those claiming employment and support allowance; claimants of the personal independence payment will still be subject to those inappropriate assessments. Bizarrely, the former Work and Pensions Secretary, the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), welcomed this “progressive” reform of the retesting regime, although he introduced the assessments and they were voted for by Conservative Members. May we have a debate in Government time on the state of the assessments and their removal, as called for by my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams)?

This is our first week back after the conference recess, and there have been no votes. The first was scheduled for the Opposition day yesterday, but the Government conceded the Opposition’s motion, which basically asked for Parliament to be sovereign. We want our sovereignty back. That was all that was being asked for—making Parliament sovereign in any negotiations that affect the British people.
The referendum posed a simple question: in or out. It did not cover immigration, and it did not cover the single market. All that has to be negotiated and put to the British people through their elected representatives. The great repeal Bill, which will feature in the next Queen’s Speech, will deal only with the incorporation of EU laws in domestic law. May we have a debate in Government time on the framework of the negotiating stance, given that there are only five months—and 170 unanswered questions—before article 50 is invoked?

I know that the Leader of the House is keen to restore Parliament’s reputation. On Tuesday, he will have seen Parliament at her best—as will you, Mr Speaker, when you were in the Chair—and I am sure he will agree with me that it was incredible to see members of all parties present petitions as part of the Women Against State Pension Inequality campaign for fair transitional arrangements, led by my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley). My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) put the figure at roughly £2 billion. Given the strength of feeling among all our constituents throughout the United Kingdom, may we have a statement to do justice to the WASPI women?

May we also have a debate on the report “The Good Parliament” by Dr Sarah Childs, which recommends making Parliament user-friendly to men, women, families and those with disabilities, and could that debate be consolidated with the debate that is to be held on restoration and renewal?

You will have noted, Mr Speaker, that peace has broken out—in Colombia. I congratulate its President, Juan Manuel Santos, on a hard-won peace, and on his Nobel peace prize. We look forward to his visit on 1 November.

The Prime Minister said yesterday that she was speaking for the British people who voted to leave. Well, that amounts to just 51.9%, because 48.1% voted to remain, and 28% did not vote at all. If the Prime Minister is representing only 51.9%, my colleagues—each and every one of them, with their talents and skills—are ready to serve all the British people.

Mr Lidington: I warmly welcome the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) to her new responsibilities. I am sure that she will bring to the role the wit and good humour, as well as the commitment to the House, that we have grown to expect of her during her time here. Let me also thank and pay tribute to her predecessor, the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn), for his service. He is the living embodiment of the principle that age is nothing but a number. Throughout his parliamentary career, he has continued to express his views, and to speak on behalf of his constituents and his party, with all the passion and commitment that brought him into politics in the first place.

The hon. Lady made various points about work and pensions matters. The Government will, of course, respond in the way that they normally do to petitions that Members present to the House, and Members in all parts of the House will have an opportunity to put questions to DWP Ministers about their responsibilities as early as next Monday, when DWP questions will take place.

I think that the hon. Lady tempted providence slightly when she talked about honeymoons. I have yet to see the Leader of the Opposition’s honeymoon even begin, let alone end.

I am sure that Members on both sides of the House will have sympathy for the hon. Lady’s call to restore our Marmite. The best advice I can give her, in relation to her email correspondent, is to advise Jeremy that a number of own-brand yeast extracts will be available during the current commercial dispute between the wholesaler and the retailer, and I am confident that in an area such as Islington there will be a wealth of traditional and organic alternatives available to the discerning customer.

I shall now touch on some of the other points that the hon. Lady raised. I shall take back and reflect on the points she made about a debate on the Childs report, “The Good Parliament”, and whether it would be appropriate to link that to the debate that we are going to have on the restoration and renewal report in due course. I know that the Select Committee on Women and Equalities is looking into the implications of “The Good Parliament” report as part of its own work at the moment. The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, my right hon. Friend, the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) and the Leader of the Opposition gave evidence to that Committee on some of those matters earlier this week.

The hon. Lady raised questions about foreign workers. The position on this is perfectly clear. The Government have made it plain that there is no question of naming individual employees or trying to shame companies, but it is not unreasonable for the Government to go out to consultation—which is what is being planned—on whether firms should be asked to supply evidence about the proportion of their workforce that is made up of workers from outside the UK. For one thing, that might be a way of providing independent evidence about labour shortages and informing the Government’s approach to what we and British industry might do address that issue. This system already operates in the United States of America, after all, so I do not think that a consultation of that sort is unreasonable in the way that she suggests.

The hon. Lady also asked about European matters. The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my right hon. Friend, the Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr Davis), said yesterday during his speech, and I reiterate today, that we will make Government time available for debates on the European Union on the Floor of the House. At the moment, we are considering exactly when that will happen and what form those debates might take. I was glad that the Opposition accepted the Government amendment yesterday, but before the hon. Lady gives lectures on democracy, she really needs to have a word with some of her shadow Cabinet colleagues. I yield to no one in my open support for the remain cause during the referendum, but if we are democrats, we have to accept the outcome. It remains the case that, as recently as 11 September, the shadow Foreign Secretary, the hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), said on “The Murnaghan Programme” that that was not enough. She said:

“I think that we have to have some form of democratic, an injection of democracy in some way...I think we need to go back to the British people in some way”;

Mr Lidington: I warmly welcome the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) to her new responsibilities. I am sure that she will bring to the role the wit and good humour, as well as the commitment to the House, that we have grown to expect of her during her time here. Let me also thank and pay tribute to her predecessor, the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn), for his service. He is the living embodiment of the principle that age is nothing but a number. Throughout his parliamentary career, he has continued to express his views, and to speak on behalf of his constituents and his party, with all the passion and commitment that brought him into politics in the first place.
[Mr Lidington]

That is at odds with the message that came from the Opposition Front Bench yesterday about the Opposition accepting the referendum outcome, whatever view any of us took during the campaign. So I hope that we will see greater consistency from the Opposition in future.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): May we have an early debate on gravy trains? That would give us the opportunity to look at the latest jobs on offer at HS2, namely the position of chief executive, which will pay between £700,000 and £800,000 a year, and posts for four recent graduates, which offer salaries of up to about £30,000. Those graduates would be required to “write the story of HS2 from inception to the present day.” I do not know whether the Leader of the House and the Speaker would agree with me that our constituents would not consider that a good use of taxpayers’ money. What success has the Leader of the House had in persuading HS2 and the Department for Transport that spending money on writing their version of “Thomas the Tank Engine” is not exactly enhancing their reputations?

Mr Lidington: When this report reached Transport Ministers, they immediately issued instructions to cancel the advertisement and approach this matter in a different way. Undoubtedly, there are lessons to be learned from the history of HS2 up till now, but my right hon. Friend will share the view of the Transport Secretary that the approach that she has described was not the best use of taxpayers’ money.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week. I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) on her appointment. She comes to her position as a well-liked and respected individual, and I certainly look forward to working with her. I wish also to pay a short tribute to the hon. Member for Newport West (Paul Flynn). To go from two jobs to no jobs is pretty callous, so let us get a petition together to get the hon. Gentleman restored to the Front Bench. The hon. Member for Walsall South is the fourth shadow Leader of the House in my short tenure here. I hope that her position is a little more durable than that of some of her illustrious predecessors. Who would have thought that the first casualty of this hard Brexit would be the nation’s supplies of Marmite? The catastrophic collapse in the pound has led to an unseemly spat between Tesco and Unilever, which seems to suggest that even our supplies of PG Tips might be threatened. As I was sitting around with a morning brew, I thought that perhaps it was time to reconsider and rethink this plan for a full English Brexit. Perhaps we could consider a more palatable continental Brexit instead.

We need an urgent statement about the position of European nationals in this country. A number of my constituents who are EU nationals are getting increasingly anxious and concerned about some of the anti-immigrant, xenophobic rhetoric that has emerged from the Conservative party in the past few weeks. They want to be reassured that their status is secure. All this talk about lists, closed or not, and about having their position in this country relegated to little more than bargaining chips, is setting off all sorts of alarm bells.

We learned next to nothing about the Tory Brexit plans yesterday, other than the fact that it is the hard right of the Conservative party who are now in charge of the agenda. I support the calls to have full debates on this matter. We owe it to our constituents to ensure that they are properly consulted and involved in the process. I am grateful to the Leader of the House for announcing that further details will be forthcoming. Perhaps he could tell us a little bit more about them just now.

It is great to be back after the conference recess. The reason that I cut such a lonely figure on these Benches this morning is that our conference actually starts today, which makes the idea of a conference recess almost totally pointless. Will the Leader of the House have another look at this again? If we are to have a conference recess, can it please include all the main parties of this House or none of them at all?

Mr Lidington: I will certainly take on board the hon. Gentleman’s last point about party conferences, although, as he will know, all parties fix the dates and book the venues of their conferences several years ahead, so this is not something on which I can offer hope of change in the immediate future.

On his serious point about EU nationals living in the United Kingdom, I will respond by saying two things. First, people who have come lawfully from other European countries and who are living here, working here and contributing to our society in many different positive ways should be both welcomed and respected. We should have no truck whatever with xenophobic language let alone with tolerance of some of the appalling instances of abuse or even physical attacks that we have seen. Those should be deplored and condemned by people from all political parties, and by people who were active on both sides of the referendum campaign. Secondly, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made it clear more than once that her objective is to secure an agreement that enables people who are already in the United Kingdom lawfully to remain after we leave the EU. She would be keen to get agreement on that at an early stage of the exit negotiations. The only thing that we can see that would stop that happening would be if, for some reason, it were not possible to persuade the other 27 countries that British citizens on their territory should not be accorded similar rights. It ought to be in everyone’s interests to settle this definitively and early on, and I hope that we are able to achieve that.

I do not want to dwell too much on Marmite; I am sure that there is as much appetite for that product in Scotland as there is anywhere else in the United Kingdom. I simply note that, on the information that I have been given this morning, the ingredients of Marmite are not imported into the UK but are manufactured and supplied here. It is probably not for the Government to intervene in what seems to be a dispute between two commercial companies.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The Government have done extremely well in making their announcement about the disapplication of aspects of the European convention on human rights from the
battlefield in future conflicts. This has been welcomed by hon. Members on both sides of the House, not least by my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer) who, with fellow members of the Defence Sub-Committee and other hon. Members, has focused attention on this important issue in a tremendous campaign. When will the Government make further announcements, not about protecting people in future conflicts, but about protecting people who currently face pursuit in the courts over past and present conflicts?

**Mr Lidington:** Following the statement made by my right hon. Friend the Defence Secretary a few days ago, the Government, led by the Ministry of Defence, are actively looking at the measures that we would need to take to give effect to this policy. Legislative change might be required, in which case we shall have to prepare such legislation and bring it forward as early as we can, when there is an appropriate legislative opportunity.

**Ian Mearns** (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business statement and the news that next week we will be debating British Home Stores and the impact on its former work force. There will also be a general debate on industrial strategy, which is long overdue. I thank the right hon. Gentleman for notice that Thursday 27 October will be a full day for Backbench Business Committee debates; we had understood that it would be a part day.

May I ask Members bringing applications to the Committee for specific dates to give us a number of weeks’ notice? This afternoon, for instance, we have a debate on baby loss, which has been secured with the advance agreement of the Leader of the House, but we were able to do that only because we had advance notice. This week, of course, is baby loss awareness week.

Members may have noticed that the occupation of these particular Benches has been a bit thin in the past few weeks, and this week in particular. It is because my hon. Friends the Members for Easington (Grahame M. Morris) and for Blyth Valley (Mr Campbell) are both undergoing treatment as they battle their illnesses. I wish them, on behalf of the House, a speedy recovery.

**Mr Lidington:** On behalf of the Government and my right hon. and hon. Friends, I join the hon. Gentleman in wishing a speedy restoration to health to the hon. Members for Easington (Grahame M. Morris) and for Blyth Valley (Mr Campbell).

I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for what he says. We always try to give as much notice as possible to him and his Committee. I should issue a word of caution to Members bringing applications to the Committee, the business for that week is provisional at this stage; I will be able to speak with much more certainty next week.

**Amanda Milling** (Cannock Chase) (Con): Given that I was born and brought up in Burton upon Trent, I feel that I should be talking about Marmite—after all, that is where it is made—but I am going to talk about buses. In July, I supported Arriva’s “catch the bus” week. Only a matter of weeks later, Arriva announced that it was axing services, including the No. 3 bus to Norton Canes, leaving elderly residents who are reliant on that service completely cut off and unable to catch a bus. May we have a debate in Government time about the importance of bus services to the health and wellbeing of elderly residents?

**Mr Lidington:** My hon. Friend is a fierce champion for the communities in her constituency on bus services, as on other matters, and I hope that she will have the opportunity to make her case directly to Arriva, as the local bus provider, and to the relevant local authority about whether it can provide any kind of subsidy to bus services that are essential socially, but that are not viable in strictly economic terms. The Government want a diverse mix of public transport provision—bus and rail services, and other kinds—and I am sure that if she wants to put her case in detail to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport, he and his team will look carefully at the concerns that she expresses.

**Derek Twigg** (Halton) (Lab): The Care Quality Commission has said today that it is becoming concerned about the fragility of the adult social care market, with evidence suggesting that it might be approaching a tipping point. May we have an urgent debate about the crisis in social care funding? Only on Tuesday I raised with the Secretary of State for Health the fact that local authorities must be properly funded for social care.

**Mr Lidington:** All hon. Members, on whichever side of the House they sit, certainly understand the importance to their constituents of ensuring that NHS services and local authority social care are organised and managed in a way that looks to the constituent—to the client or patient—first of all, and that budgets are organised and commissioning takes place to try to ensure there is as much support for the needs of the individual as possible. I had the chance this morning to look briefly at the Care Quality Commission’s report. What struck me was that it says that 72% of adult social care services, 87% of GP practices and 56% of the core services of NHS hospital trusts have been rated as either good or outstanding. It does point to challenges that need to be addressed and argues that less-well-performing authorities need to learn from the experience of those that are more successful. It seems to me that the commission is doing its job as an independent inspectorate, but what it has actually found is that the quality of care that most people receive in this country is very good.

**Oliver Dowden** (Hertsmere) (Con): Constituents in Potters Bar, Borehamwood and Radlett in my constituency rely on Govia Thameslink railways. They are used to endless excuses for its lamentable performance, but the company reached a new low yesterday, when we discovered that it is cancelling trains if it discovers graffiti that it deems offensive. Does the Leader of the House agree that that is completely absurd? Is there some mechanism for the House to convey to the company that its first priority should be getting passengers to work and home on time?

**Mr Lidington:** My hon. Friend is clearly campaigning very hard on behalf of his constituents. Some years ago, I used to live quite close to his constituency, so I am well aware of the importance of those commuter rail services
to the people whom he represents. I suggest that his message to Goveia should be to encourage it, yes, to put the need to provide for passengers first, but also to work more closely with its cleaning contractors and the transport police to ensure that trains are cleaned of offensive graffiti in a timely fashion and that the people responsible for the graffiti are identified and brought to justice.

Mr Speaker: I think that the Leader of the House went to school in Elstree, if memory serves me correctly.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): May I join the Leader of the House in congratulating the shadow Leader of the House on her appointment? It has taken her only six years to get to the Front Bench; I am still in the same place I was 29 years ago. This is also my first opportunity to congratulate the Leader of the House on his appointment. I first met him 40 years ago, and indeed may well have voted for him to be chairman of the Cambridge University Conservative Association all that time ago.

Last week, 140 young Yemenis were killed in Sanaa, when bombs fell on a funeral cortège. Last night, Houthi rebels fired at warships owned by the Americans in the gulf of Aden. The situation in Yemen is deteriorating. We had an important debate on Syria that was well attended in the House and granted you, Mr Speaker, but we must not allow Yemen to be the forgotten conflict. When can we have a full debate on the situation in Yemen, before it gets even worse?

Mr Lidington: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his kind words. I think that somewhere in my loft I have the programme card that lists him as a CUCA college secretary at some distant date in the past. He raises a really serious subject. Yemen is too often overlooked as we focus on the appalling situation in Syria. As he will, I think, know by now, he has obtained an Adjournment debate on Yemen on 18 October, which will enable him to raise some of these matters, and we have Foreign and Commonwealth Office questions on 18 October, too, which will enable him and other colleagues to raise these matters with the Secretary of State and Foreign Office Ministers. I completely share the right hon. Gentleman’s view that the Government need to continue to do all that they can to help to support the UN special envoy for Yemen and his valiant efforts to establish a credible peace process, and to devote a decent slice of our humanitarian aid budget to helping people in desperate need in that country.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): The Leader of the House will soon bring to the House a debate on the full decant of Parliament from the Palace of Westminster. He knows my views—I question the proposal—but that is not important; what is important is that we get a range of options. Will he consider, when he brings forward the debate, having not just one nuclear option—that we all leave for six years—but a range of options? For instance, one option could be that we start the work now, during the summer breaks, and we do so from 20 July to 12 October, either by abolishing the September sitting or, if that is not possible, holding it in Edinburgh, to buttress the Union, or Belfast or Cardiff. May we please have a full range of options? Sometimes in life, a Marmite solution that one loves or hates is not the best solution; sometimes a more nuanced approach is a better way of doing things.

Mr Lidington: As I said earlier, there will be, as recommended by the Joint Committee on the Palace of Westminster, a debate and decision by this House, and separately by the House of Lords, on the proposals in the Committee’s report. I am giving thought to the precise wording of the motion to be tabled. Whatever the form of words used, the motion will be, subject to your ruling, Mr Speaker, capable of amendment. I am sure that hon. Members of all parties will want to look at the motion and see whether they want to change it in any way.

I hope that hon. Members take the time to read the Joint Committee’s report. It is a completely cross-party Committee. It spent a lot of time on the subject and interrogated a lot of witnesses before reaching its recommendations, and the House owes it to colleagues who served on the Committee to look seriously at the arguments and evidence that it has presented.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): The Leader of the House just put a very complacent gloss on the Care Quality Commission report. This is our independent health and social care regulator. The report is devastating. It contains an explicit request, which is unprecedented from the commission, for urgent funds for social care now. That follows exactly the same call by the person whom the Government appointed to lead the NHS, Simon Stevens. When will we get an emergency statement from the Secretary of State for Health on what he will do about our collapsing health and social care sector?

Mr Lidington: I take issue with the right hon. Gentleman’s description of my earlier response. I not only had a look at the report this morning, but listened to the chief executive of the commission speaking on BBC radio, and it was he who said that the key lesson was that best practice needed to be copied by those authorities and NHS areas that were not delivering the best quality service at present. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health will, of course, want to consider very carefully and urgently the views expressed in the Care Quality Commission’s report. I am sure he will want to make clear to the House in the relatively near future his view on its recommendations, and there will be opportunity at Health questions or otherwise to put questions to him.

Mr Andrew Turner (Isle of Wight) (Con): In East Cowes, as well, no doubt, as elsewhere, the Homes and Communities Agency appears to have forgotten that its brief includes delivering much-needed business premises as well as homes, thus threatening economic development and island homes. Will the Leader of the House consider scheduling a debate on this issue?

Mr Lidington: I cannot promise a debate in Government time, but my hon. Friend has been in the House long enough to know that there may be opportunities by way of Adjournment debates or questions to Ministers that enable him to speak up on behalf of his constituents.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): Figures show that one in five of my constituents are over-indebted, which is why I am bringing the Money Advice Service to Bristol South tomorrow to meet other local debt advice
services and support them. May we have a debate on problem debt to help us to understand the Government’s position and their strategy for addressing this serious issue for working people?

Mr Lidington: We all have constituents who have benefited from debt advice, which is not always best provided by an agency that has “OHMS” stamped all over it. It is sometimes better provided through a voluntary organisation that is able to engage with people in a less rule-bound way than is usually the case with even the best-intentioned Government agencies. I will take back to my hon. Friends with ministerial responsibility the concern that the hon. Lady has expressed and ask the relevant Minister to write to her directly.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): The National Citizen Service provides incredible opportunities for young people in Corby and east Northamptonshire, ably led by Nigel Anderson and his team at the University of the First Age. With the very welcome news that David Cameron is to take a greater role in the NCS programme going forward, may we have a debate next week on the terrific service that provides for young people across our country?

Mr Lidington: That is a cause that David Cameron championed during his time as Prime Minister and I am delighted that he is continuing his association with the cause afterwards. As my hon. Friend will know, earlier this week the Government introduced the National Citizen Service Bill, which will put the NCS on a statutory basis for the first time.

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): Yesterday I attended an event organised by the Gun Control Network to mark the 20th anniversary of the implementation of measures for gun control following the Dunblane tragedy. Measures brought in at that time have made an enormous difference and have undoubtedly saved many lives. However, regrettably, people are still dying from gun use and gun ownership, and too often that is caused by licensed firearms. May we have a statement from the Government on their plans to continue to combat gun crime?

Mr Lidington: I know that the Home Office is looking at the legislation governing gun dealers, and that may go some way to address the hon. Gentleman’s concerns. It is right that we remind ourselves that police forces have an important responsibility to ensure that people who hold firearms licences legitimately store guns and ammunition in a secure and safe fashion, and that they are fit and responsible people to have such licences.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): The Government have a policy of closing old Victorian prisons and replacing them with modern ones. Wellingborough prison, which is a reserve prison, is a modern one. May we have a statement next week from the Secretary of State for Justice on how that policy is working and, in particular, on what is happening to Wellingborough prison?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend wants to talk with the Prisons Minister about Wellingborough prison, but I am sure that the policy is the right one for our right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to be pursuing. Not only are more modern prisons more cost-effective than maintaining prisons on what has become very valuable inner-city real estate, but they provide conditions for prisoners that are more secure and humane than those in the old-fashioned, Victorian prisons, which in some cases have lasted for far too long.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Many constituents have contacted me recently regarding visitor visa refusals for close relatives who want to visit their family. Most unsuccessful applicants have travelled to the UK previously on a visitor visa and ensured full compliance. May we have a debate in Government time so that we can look into the issue and find out why we appear suddenly to be having many more refusals, which are largely unexplained, than we did in previous years?

Mr Lidington: Those of us who deal with a significant amount of immigration casework in our constituencies will know that it is quite difficult to generalise about cases when the quality of evidence varies greatly. From my experience, I advise my constituents that it is really important to have the audit trail of evidence to show that there is a previous pattern of sticking to the terms of visas that have previously been granted, and also the best possible documentation to show that a potential visitor has good reasons to return home afterwards, such as family or job reasons.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The late Eric Forth used to have a description for early-day motions, but there is insufficient chastity in language to repeat it without offence. Nevertheless, may we have a statement from my right hon. Friend on the wholesale abuse and trivialisation of EDMs, not least by the Scottish National party?

Mr Lidington: My own view is that early-day motions are an overrated currency. I was somewhat surprised to see reports this morning that Scottish National party Members have been spending so much time tabling early-day motions, and on subjects ranging from Christmas trees to the anniversary of the first screening of “Star Trek”. They need to be a little careful, because a number of us are coming to the conclusion that they do not have enough work to do, and I think their constituents would be somewhat shocked to find that out.

Mark Durkan (Foil) (SDLP): I welcome the shadow Leader of the House to her post and acknowledge her reference to the peace in Colombia and the forthcoming visit by President Santos. In that context, will the Leader of the House ensure that he and his colleagues, who have in very valid terms ruled out a second referendum here, do not misinterpret that message, given the particular challenges in Colombia, because a second referendum might well be what they need following the national dialogue and other negotiations now in train?

Mr Lidington: As the hon. Gentleman knows, we have, for a long time and under successive British Governments, supported the efforts to try to bring about an end to the appalling conflict in Colombia. We welcome the courageous work President Santos has done to try to reach that agreement, and British Ministers are certainly not going to, in any way, seek to tell the
President of Colombia how he should proceed in setting the final seal on an agreement that we all hope will endure.

**Philp Davies (Shipley) (Con):** Can we have a statement from the Secretary of State for Justice on the policy of allowing prisoners out to spend time with their families at Christmas? It seems from an answer to a parliamentary question that 973 prisoners were allowed home to spend time with their families last Christmas, including 61 murderers. I would have hoped that it went without saying that the victims of those murderers will never be able to spend Christmas at home with their families again. The Government might reflect on what the families of those victims must think when those murderers are allowed out to enjoy a family Christmas at home, when the victims will never have that experience again. The Government might tell prisoners that if they want to spend time at home with their families at Christmas they should not commit the crimes in the first place that get them sent to prison.

**Mr Lidington:** I will certainly draw the Justice Secretary’s attention to the point my hon. Friend has made, but I would just add this: all but a very small number of prisoners are going to be released one day, either at the end of the sentence or on licence. It is not unreasonable, in the context of people who are approaching the end of a sentence, to be looking at ways in which to make it possible for them to adjust to society outside prison and to earn a living, take family responsibility and, hopefully, pursue a better path at that point. Where my hon. Friend is absolutely right is that such a step needs to be looked at in the context of overall sentence planning, and should not be a way in which to soften the necessity for the punitive aspect of a prison sentence, which the public rightly expect judges and the Prison Service to see enforced.

**Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab):** In response to the crisis in the steel industry, the Government produced some better procurement guidelines. It would appear that those have not yet reached the Ministry of Defence, which is using French steel to build Trident submarines. May we have a statement by the Business Secretary on how those procurement guidelines are affecting the steel industry in a positive way and how he will move the Ministry of Defence’s marks up from E minus to alpha plus?

**Mr Lidington:** We do source British steel wherever possible, but in this case there was no viable UK bid for the specialised steel required for this particular part of the Successor submarine manufacture. Other stages of construction will include steel that British suppliers can support, and we expect them to take the opportunity to bid. As with every major Government procurement, we are working hard to ensure that, where we can, we source British steel. We expect about 85% of the BAE Systems supply chain for the new submarines to be based in the UK.

**Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con):** May we have a debate in Government time on long-term funding for health and social care and on the way in which we raise that funding? There was an interesting leader in *The Times* yesterday on that subject, which made some suggestions, but it is vital that we take the opportunity now to look at how things move forward post-2020, given the Government’s welcome support up to that point.

**Mr Lidington:** It will be important, as we move towards 2020, to see the NHS making best possible use of the extra £10 billion the Government have allocated to it—£2 billion more than the NHS itself had requested—but also for the NHS to deliver on the internal reforms that the chief executive has said he intends and needs to carry out. I am sure my hon. Friend will find an opportunity to raise some of these wider questions about future funding with Health Ministers, either at questions or perhaps through a Westminster Hall debate.

**Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con):** May we have a debate on the political and security situation in Kashmir? As my right hon. Friend will be aware, there has been a serious escalation in violence there in recent weeks, which is understandably a matter of great concern to those with a Kashmiri heritage not just in my constituency but right across the country.

**Mr Lidington:** My hon. Friend may well have the opportunity to raise this matter directly with the Foreign Secretary at Foreign and Commonwealth Office questions on Tuesday. I share his wish to see an end to the violence in Kashmir, which has continued for far too long. That will in the end depend on the readiness of the Governments of both India and Pakistan to hammer out an agreement with which they both feel able to live.

**Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab):** I offer warm congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), whose talents have at last been recognised. Her appointment guarantees that the exchanges between the shadow Leader of the House and the Leader of the House will continue to be a very welcome oasis of political restraint, good sense and good humour.

When can we debate the royal prerogative and the supreme duty of the sovereign to act in the interests of the nation when a Government start to act in their own interests rather than those of the nation? Now that there is a certain Brexit crisis ahead—and given that we should judge the value of the referendum on the basis that it was won by deceptions, exaggerations and lies from both parties—how will the Leader of the House handle the situation if, in the service of the nation and in the service of the will of the democratic majority of this House, a decision is taken to withdraw the royal prerogatives delegated by the sovereign? What will he do in such a situation, if the sovereign is acting in the service of the nation?

**Mr Lidington:** I do not want to say anything that could prejudice court proceedings under way today that touch on precisely the issues the hon. Gentleman raises. However, when I looked at the *Hansard* report of yesterday’s debate, I found that the issues of prerogative powers and the rights of Parliament were aired at considerable length and I am sure that that will continue as we find other opportunities to debate the European issue in the months to come.
Mr Lidington: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising this matter on behalf of his constituents. I confess that it is not a subject with which I am familiar. It strikes me that it is likely to involve the responsibilities of a number of Departments. My advice to him is to look for opportunities to raise it with the relevant Ministers at questions or to secure an Adjournment debate, so that he can get a direct response from Ministers to the concerns his constituents are expressing.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): More than 65,000 people are employed in the British nuclear industry, and I am delighted that more than a fifth of that workforce are women. May we have a debate on the importance of the nuclear sector to our economy, particularly considering the looming energy gap, and on how we can support nuclear through continued investment in skills, infrastructure and the supply chain? It would be particularly pertinent, given the recent announcement on Hinkley Point C.

Mr Lidington: I very much welcome the hon. Lady’s support for the nuclear industry. I share her view that nuclear has an important part to play in this country, as it already has in France, as part of the overall energy mix to ensure that we have supplies of fuel that are as clean as possible and reliable. The nuclear industry provides many opportunities for high-skilled and relatively well-paid employment, often in parts of the country where such jobs are very scarce indeed. Although I cannot promise her an early debate in Government time, I think her comments will have struck a chord with Members in all parts of the House.

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): On Monday, there was a written statement from the Ministry of Defence on protecting our soldiers overseas from the legal process. The Chairman of the Select Committee on Defence today highlighted how we should be looking after our soldiers who are under that process. In Northern Ireland, we are just about to start a process for some people who are being hauled back, quite possibly for political reasons. May we please have a statement by Ministers from the three Departments together—Defence, Northern Ireland and Justice—to ensure that our servicemen are treated fairly?

Mr Lidington: Clearly, in all parts of the United Kingdom, decisions about individual prosecutions and court cases are rightly the province of independent prosecuting authorities. I am uneasy about the idea that Governments should intervene to either initiate or stop a prosecution that has been decided upon independently in that way, but I completely understand the point the hon. Gentleman makes. Pretty well everyone in the House will acknowledge the bravery over so many years of the servicemen and women who served in Northern Ireland. They were a line of defence for decent, law-abiding people of all communities in Northern Ireland against ruthless terrorism. I will draw his remarks to the attention of the Ministers he mentioned.

Simon Danczuk (Rochdale) (Ind): Walter Kershaw from my constituency is a world-famous mural artist. His work is exceptionally well received from Portugal to Peru, but that work needs to come back home. May we...
have a debate on what Arts Council England funding is available for projects such as Walter painting a mural in Rochdale town centre?

Mr Lidington: I cannot promise an immediate debate in Government time. It is quite an important principle that the Arts Council administers its budget at arm’s length from Ministers; we do not want any suggestion that political sympathies might start to influence individual grant decisions made by Arts Council England or arts organisations elsewhere in the UK. But the hon. Gentleman has demonstrated again that he is a champion of the achievements of Rochdale in the artistic world as well as in many other areas of life.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): Tom Weaver and Philip Loveday are two disabled veterans living in Bridgend. They decided to spend £1,500 of their own savings to buy lunch for citizens across the county borough of Bridgend. They wanted to carry out random acts of kindness for people because in living with their disability they had found great help and support in the local community. The local branch of Subway added another 500 meals, so we handed out 1,000 lunches. Given that this week we have discussed Brexit, Aleppo and the fall of the pound, may we have a Government statement on the importance of random acts of kindness in raising the spirits of us all and making this a great country to live in?

Mr Lidington: I welcome the hon. Lady’s comments and add my unreserved congratulations, support and good will to her two constituents. It is the truth that in our constituency work every single one of us in this House comes across cases, such as the one she has described to us this morning, of the most incredible acts of kindness and public spirit by our fellow citizens.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): I am sure the House will join me in wishing Sheffield’s very own Jessica Ennis-Hill all the best as she announces her retirement, and in congratulating Yorkshire—God’s very own county, of course—on securing the world road cycling championships in 2019. Will the Leader of the House commit the Government to continuing to support the county as it works to make the most of this wonderful opportunity?

Mr Lidington: I am happy to endorse the hon. Lady’s view that any increase in incidence of childhood cancer should be deplored and that we should be active in seeking ways in which to prevent the occurrence of cancer, and to ensure early detection and effective treatment. I hope he will have the opportunity at Health questions in future or in an Adjournment debate to continue to highlight that important subject.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Houmous and taramasalata are big business in Blaenau Gwent. Zorba Foods makes dips, employs more than 300 people and has a turnover of £50 million a year. However, the cost of its imported ingredients such as chickpeas has increased because the pound has dropped by nearly 20%. May we have a debate on Brexit and its impact on family food bills, because it looks like both breakfast and lunch are getting more expensive as our currency weakens?

Mr Lidington: We seem to be moving from toast and sandwiches through to Pitta bread and dips. The truth is that when sterling falls, imports become more expensive but exports become cheaper. When sterling rises, it is the other way around. Companies of all types learn to plan and adjust for those currency risks. Currencies go up and down, fluctuating in value. If the companies in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency are producing good, high-quality products in an efficient way, they should look forward to a successful future.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The increase in childhood cancers is alarming—it is some 40% in the past 16 years. Even given population growth, the increase is still 30%. That is down to things such as lifestyle, the environment, genetics, air pollution, pesticides and diet. May we have a debate on the increase in children’s cancers, which are critical for each and every one of us in the House?

Mr Lidington: Nobody would dissent from the hon. Gentleman’s view that any increase in incidence of childhood cancer should be deplored and that we should be active in seeking ways in which to prevent the occurrence of cancer, and to ensure early detection and effective treatment. I hope he will have the opportunity at Health questions in future or in an Adjournment debate to continue to highlight that important subject.

BILL PRESENTED

Criminal Finances

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Amber Rudd, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Attorney General, Secretary David Mundell, Secretary James Brokenshire and Mr Ben Wallace, presented a Bill to amend the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002; make provision in connection with terrorist property; create corporate offences for cases where a person associated with a body corporate or partnership facilitates the commission by another person of a tax evasion offence; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 75) with explanatory notes (Bill 75-EN).
Backbench Business

Baby Loss

11.42 am

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered baby loss.

It is an honour and privilege to open the debate, and I thank you, Mr Speaker, for giving us the use of your house to launch baby loss awareness week in Parliament yesterday, which is the first time it has been officially recognised. Parliament is helping to break the silence around the death of a child, which is the most devastating loss that can happen to any parent. Last year, when my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) spoke in the Adjournment debate, neither of us was prepared for the huge response from parents who have suffered similar losses.

In the Prime Minister’s recent speech, she spoke about tackling injustice where she found it. The sheer scale of child loss in the UK is an injustice, and one that is suffered by so many families year in, year out. Child loss is devastating for each family involved. I should like to outline the size of the problem facing parents, speak about what can be done to prevent loss on the scale we currently face in the UK, and finally talk about bereavement care and best practice to support parents through such a terrible time.

The major types of child loss include miscarriage, stillbirth and neonatal death, although the Department of Health needs to look at streptococcus B deaths, ectopic pregnancies and many other specialist areas such as multiple birth pregnancies.

One in four pregnancies will end in miscarriage. This is often a silent killer, one where parents receive very little support. Of the estimated 200,000 mothers and their families who are affected by miscarriage every year, many will suffer in silence and isolation. A woman has to go through three consecutive miscarriages before any investigation will be carried out.

Ms O’Sullivan, speaking of her experiences after four miscarriages, said:

“The lack of recognition for miscarriage often just serves to reinforce the flawed idea that somehow a pregnancy ‘didn’t matter’, which increases the feelings of isolation”.

She went on to say:

“The loneliness and isolation that miscarriage brings, and the way that it can affect other aspects of life—hopes, dreams, decisions about work—are so difficult and yet under-recognised. We need to demystify it and make it okay to talk about.”

One parent I know wrote this to me:

“Before I even knew I was pregnant I developed a butterfly rash across my chest. My GP dismissed it as an ‘allergic rash’. No blood test, nothing. When I miscarried 9 weeks later at 12 weeks, my GP cheerily said, ‘Keep trying. Miscarriage is common at your age.’ I was 37. No blood test. Feeling disheartened and directionless I went onto a further two early miscarriages without even daring to call the GP and waste his time. At my fourth miscarriage, I started googling. I approached my GP again—could all this be due to my existing thyroid condition? ‘Extremely unlikely’ was the response. Again, no blood test, but a recommendation to quit my stressful job. I obliged. It was only at a routine annual hospital check-up with my thyroid doctor after my fourth miscarriage four years later that I heard, ‘This sounds like Hughes syndrome, let’s do a blood test.’ St Thomas’s hospital confirmed the diagnosis, but sadly not soon enough to save the baby I was carrying—my fifth. Happily, after proper treatment I became pregnant again, finally giving birth to a healthy boy on the eve of my 42nd birthday. After five miscarriages and five years of my life lost to hope and grief and hope again due to my GP’s ignorance, I still feel cheated and, shame on me, a little bitter. I urge you please, give miscarriage the research, resources and respect it deserves.”

This is just one example of why we need action to help us to find the root causes of miscarriage. I am pleased that earlier this year the first miscarriage research centre in the UK dedicated to preventing early miscarriage opened. That centre is working with Warwick, Birmingham and Imperial NHS trusts, as well as Queen Charlotte’s. It is undertaking excellent research. I know that because my sister, who has had seven miscarriages, has benefited from its work. This year, she gave birth to baby Ella. I am thrilled for her.

The clinicians there, Dr Maya and the team, Dr Tom Bourne and others are doing ground-breaking work on the Genesis Project, looking at the issues around early miscarriage. As an example of how dedicated the staff are, the receptionists who had seen women walking in and out of Queen Charlotte’s, organised for the first time, and in their own time on a Saturday, a multiple miscarriage support group. Clinicians and psychologists also attended in their free time. It has benefited a huge number of women. That learning has the potential to really help to support the work the Government would like to achieve in tackling our child loss rates.

In 2014, 3,245 stillbirths were recorded by Embrace UK. That rate is shockingly high for a high-income country. Even more frightening is the fact that the causes of 46% of stillbirths are unknown. This is devastating for families who want answers. It is also unacceptable in this day and age that more is not being done to identify and investigate the cause of death. When combined with neo-natal death rates, over 6,000 patients are suffering child loss every year. Feelings of isolation and loneliness are experienced by parents who suffer other forms of child loss. Data on tackling stillbirth in The Lancet rate the UK 114 out of 164 countries for progress in reducing stillbirth. Justin Farrimond, who engaged in the digital outreach debate organised by the House on Monday, put it this way:

“To the nurse that had a bad day, that didn’t take correct measurements, that failed to notice a lack of growth, that chose not to look at previous records, that decided not to engage with the mother, that was instrumental in the loss of our baby—we don’t want an apology—your actions were unintentional—we don’t want you to lose your job, you need to continue in your post. In future we know you will be more careful, you will be a model nurse, because you will know what can happen if you have just one bad day. When you have lost a baby you don’t want revenge, retribution, or compensation. You only want to be understood, and for it to never happen again”.

That powerful quotation reflects what so many parents have said to me. They want lessons to be learnt. Most of all, they do not want it to happen to anyone else.

In order to achieve that, there needs to be better investigation of full-term stillbirth where no foetal abnormality is present. There needs to be greater willingness by medical staff to discuss the value of post mortems with parents, so that causes can be identified. There needs to be better and thorough investigation. Professor Cameron of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists has stated:
“The quality of local investigations into cases of stillbirth, early neonatal death and severe brain injury occurring as a result of incidents during term labour must improve”.

Nick Boles (Grantham and Stamford) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a wonderful, wonderful speech and I am very glad to be involved in this debate. I am here because of my constituent Rolf Dalhaug, who lost one of his twin sons, Thor, due to some mistakes during birth. He is particularly concerned that we should take on board the messages in the report to which my hon. Friend has referred about the importance of learning and reviews. I want to underline the point she is making and look forward to hearing the Minister say what we are doing to ensure that that happens.

Antoinette Sandbach: I am grateful for that intervention because it makes the point entirely.

Professor Cameron went on:

“Stillbirth rates in the UK remain high and our current data indicate that nearly 1,000 babies a year die or are left severely brain injured because it makes the point entirely. Of incidents during term labour must improve.”

The parents who engaged in the digital debate on Twitter earlier this week to raise their concerns about baby loss spoke of the need for third trimester scans and greater consistency of care during the pre-birth period, during labour and following the loss of an infant.

I want to move on to neonatal death. Mr Speaker, as you know, I spoke about my experiences with Sam last year. Parents from around the country wrote to me of their experiences, some dating back many years and others from more recently. One father told me about his son George. He wrote:

“On 7th November my wife and I were delighted when baby George came into our lives, but on the 5th January just days after the festivities our lives were rocked, when our beautiful baby boy passed away in his sleep. Nothing could have prepared us for the hopelessness and feeling of loss, each morning waking up wishing it was just a bad dream. As we watch the seconds turn into hours, days, weeks and even months, things for us felt hopeless, it was only the knowledge that our other children needed us that kept us from drowning in self-pity.”

George’s father went on that, like other parents,

“I found everyone affected share similar experiences, all wanting to do something, all wanting to make a difference. This is probably why I still feel I should do more, and more is never enough. I am now putting my spare time into raising awareness of sudden infant death syndrome and raising money for charities”.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): My hon. Friend is making an emotional and passionate speech. Two of my constituents, Annika and James Dowson, attended a reception yesterday that was kindly provided by Mr Speaker. They suffered the loss of their baby, Gypsy, who was stillborn in Scarborough hospital. Annika stayed on the maternity ward, with expectant mothers, listening in the most tragic of circumstances to babies crying. Following that, she started to raise money, putting her energies to good use. She raised £9,000 towards the funding of the £134,000 bereavement suite at Scarborough hospital. Does my hon. Friend agree that by directing their energies in such ways, parents can really make a difference to other people and gain support from each other in the process?

Antoinette Sandbach: I do agree. I had the pleasure of meeting Annika last year, following on from the speech in Parliament. I know that there are many parents like her who want to see some good come out of the loss. It demonstrates the importance of motivating those parents and allowing them to get involved. Very often, the Snowdrop suite at Scarborough hospital acts as a real reminder in memory of Gypsy.

Heidi Alexander (Lewisham East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate and on speaking in such a powerful and deeply human way. She is talking about parents’ desire to see some good come from their loss. Does she agree that where failings have occurred, part of that critical process should involve NHS trusts communicating with parents on an ongoing basis about the actions and steps being taken to ensure that these tragedies are not repeated?

Antoinette Sandbach: I certainly do. The more open trusts can be and the more they can share information, the more we are likely to achieve reductions in baby death rates. We need that learning to happen in order to tackle what went wrong and why. Without openness, we will not have that.

Freedom of information requests that I submitted to every NHS England trust indicated that approximately 25% of maternity hospitals still do not have bereavement suites. I am aware that, because of the huge difference it makes to parents, the Government have done much to ensure that funding is available and that action can be taken to tackle the problem.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing this matter before the House. We well remember the Adjournment debates to which she and the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) contributed. One in four pregnancies end in loss, and every one of us in this House has seen the reality of that. My own mother had three miscarriages, as did my sister and one of my staff members. We want to take the opportunity to stand together with all those who have loved and lost a baby. We want to say to them, “We acknowledge the loss; we grieve with you; we pray for the future of your family.” Does the hon. Lady acknowledge the importance of having someone with faith in the grieving suite and of the Church assisting?

Antoinette Sandbach: I know many good examples of that. I shall talk a little later about the Doncaster and Bassetlaw Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, where a midwife together with the chaplain have developed the most amazing suite of resources to support parents. They have tailor-made the information available specifically for the loss that parents face—whether a miscarriage or a stillbirth—and it was all done in their own time, unpaid and unsupported. There is that level of dedication. For every area where there is bad practice, there are fantastic and dedicated clinicians, midwives and indeed chaplains, providing support to bereaved parents.
Like George’s father, members of the all-party parliamentary group want to make a difference. We welcome the Government’s commitment to a 20% reduction in stillbirth rates by 2020 and a halving by 2030 and the additional resources that have been put into the perinatal mortality tool. We are calling for some additional steps which we believe will help to deliver those targets.

The report that we launched yesterday identifies three key aims. The first is prevention. We need a sustained public health campaign that informs parents of the known risks. We know that parents of twins are three times more likely to suffer loss. Black and ethnic minority groups face much higher rates of stillbirth and loss. Mothers over 40, mothers living in poverty, and teenage mothers all have increased risk of stillbirth or neonatal death.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): I am most grateful to both the hon. Lady and the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince) for securing the debate.

A Dwyfor mother asked me to take the opportunity to express the depth of her feeling. She wrote:

“We don’t just suffer the loss of a baby, we lose a toddler, a child, a teenager, birthdays, Christmas days, mother/father’s days the list is endless as is the grief. The pain of losing a child never leaves you.”

She also wanted me to say that she believes that a third-trimester scan would have made a significant difference in her case.

Antoinette Sandbach: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that point.

We know that information needs to be targeted at high-risk groups: messages about smoking during pregnancy, risks associated with obesity; and, of course, the importance of not sharing a bed with your baby, and of putting the baby back to sleep. The success of the Back to Sleep campaign, supported by the Lullaby Trust, has shown what can be achieved in reducing sudden infant death. We now need similar information and of putting the baby back to sleep. The success of the Back to Sleep campaign, supported by the Lullaby Trust, has shown what can be achieved in reducing sudden infant death. We now need similar information campaigns in relation to stillbirth, Count the Kicks and reduced foetal movement. I welcome the additional resources that have been put into the perinatal mortality tool. We are calling for some additional steps which we believe will help to deliver those targets.

The work that is being done by many charities and dedicated healthcare professionals needs to be shared within the NHS to address gaps in the service when parents are effectively left to fend for themselves. That means that there needs to be better and more effective training for healthcare professionals. It is really not acceptable that such limited pre-qualification bereavement training—sometimes as little as an hour—is given to midwives, given the current stillbirth rates. There needs to be better pre-qualification training for them and also for sonographers and GPs, given the statistics.

There are a number of inspirational examples of good practice in the country, and this weekend they are being celebrated at the Butterfly Awards ceremony in Worcester. If Members have examples of good practice in their constituencies, they should consider nominating them for next year’s Butterfly Awards, so that we can increase their prominence.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I thank the hon. Lady very much for initiating the debate. If there is one thing that we can do in the House, it is break taboos, and she, along with other Members, has done that very successfully. Does she think that it is partly because of that taboo that the quality of training is so poor, and does she agree that the more we talk about miscarriage and baby loss, the better it will be?

Antoinette Sandbach: I certainly do. Baby loss awareness week has been running for 13 years, but we in this place need to ensure that it affects policy and delivers better outcomes, and that when outcomes do not change, we hold the Secretary of State and the Minister to account. I know that they have recognised the problem, but we will need to see a change in the figures by 2020.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I want to add my congratulations to the hon. Lady and also to express my intense respect and admiration for her moving and evidence-based opening to this debate. She mentioned the Butterfly Awards. Daddys with Angels, a charity that offers online help for those who have lost a baby, is campaigning for a day—15 October—to recognise baby loss, as well as raising awareness. Does she agree that that could help to make us more aware as well as helping those who have suffered to gain greater respect and understanding?

Antoinette Sandbach: October 15 is the international Wave of Light day, on which parents across the world will light candles in memory of their children. I believe that a lighthouse in Scotland will be lit up for the first time in many years in memory of lost children. I agree that if we talk about the issues and really drill down into the causes, we can start to change the figures in the UK. Key to that is raising the issues here in this place.
Our final ask to the Secretary of State for Health and the Minister is for a bereavement care pathway for parents. That needs to involve an integrated support service, including counselling for parents following the death of a child. I am grateful that, as a result of the work of the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss and information obtained through freedom of information requests, the Department of Health has commissioned Sands—the stillbirth and neonatal death charity—to start developing such a pathway. It is clear that it will require clinical commissioning groups, GPs, local NHS trusts and healthcare professionals to recognise the need for these services and to support such a pathway, working together with the third sector.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): I join other Members in thanking my hon. Friend and my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) for bringing this issue to the Chamber today. A mother and father living in my constituency had the nightmare of their baby boy passing away unexpectedly at home. The baby boy was rushed to the nearest hospital, which happened to be in a different region. The fact that the death was registered in a different region from the one in which my constituents live has caused them incredible distress. Does my hon. Friend agree that geographical and regional boundaries must not prevent grieving parents from getting the help that they need and deserve?

Antoinette Sandbach: I most certainly do. That is exactly the kind of bureaucratic barrier that needs to be broken down. My hon. Friend’s example powerfully demonstrates the need to have a proper bereavement care pathway in place in every region. It should not matter where someone lives; everyone who needs such support should be able to access it.

Mr Jamie Reed (Copeland) (Lab): In relation to the integrated bereavement care pathway, does the hon. Lady envisage the same level of service for parents who have suffered bereavement post-hospital discharge as the service that parents would receive following a bereavement in their own home?

Antoinette Sandbach: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. It should not matter what kind of loss a person suffers; they should be able to access that bereavement care pathway whether it is inside or outside hospital.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): The hon. Lady has been very generous with her time. Before she concludes her remarks, may I, as an officer of the all-party group, commend her and my fellow officers, including the hon. Members for Colchester (Will Quince) and for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), for breaking the taboo, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern) has said? I also commend the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) for her bravery in bringing this important issue forward for debate in the House. My daughter, Lucy, would have been 18 this year. When I became an MP 11 years ago, I intended to raise the issue, but I never had the hon. Lady’s bravery—I just wanted to commend her for that.

Antoinette Sandbach: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for her words; I know how important this debate is to her. She has done important work in the all-party group in helping to set out these aims and this vision so that other parents can benefit from our experiences. We know that the energy and commitment of a number of brilliant charities could be brought together with NHS trusts to help deliver the care pathway that is so badly needed for parents such as the hon. Lady.

By breaking the silence and the taboo of talking about child death, the APPG, which is composed of parents who have suffered loss, hopes that the debate will lead to better scrutiny of what is happening in maternity units and primary care relative to child loss. We welcome the additional focus from the Government in this area, but there is more to be done if other families are not to suffer the same grief and loss as so many parents in the UK.

Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Antoinette Sandbach: I am sorry, but I am about to conclude my speech.

The time has come to act and to see real change in the rates of child loss. I thank all the charities and the bereaved parents who have worked with us and whose expertise has helped to inform this debate. I know that other Members will have their own personal contributions to make.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Just before I bring in the next speaker, may I suggest that, although I am not imposing a time limit, we should aim to speak for no more than 10 minutes? In that way, everybody will have a fair speech time, and things will be equal across the Chamber.

12.12 pm

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): I want to start by paying tribute to the hon. Members for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) and for Colchester (Will Quince) for securing this debate. This is probably the hardest speech that I have ever had to write and deliver.

This week has been a tough week, as I had never heard of baby loss awareness week but it has been all around me. There have been online discussions and commemorative badges, and we have a debate in the Chamber today. I have struggled in a debate with myself about whether I should contribute today, as it is such a personal issue, and whether I want to share my very personal experiences. The absolute truth is that I struggle to talk to my family and very close friends about this, but during the events of this week, I can see that a large focus is on people talking about their loved ones, supporting each other and making sure that, when needed, important issues are raised and addressed.

I thank all my friends who have come into the Chamber today to support me as they know how hard this is for me. I also want to apologise to my many friends who I have not told about this. It is not because I do not want them to know or that I am embarrassed; it is just because I find it so very hard to do so. Ever since I was elected, I have always said that I want to be the kind of
politician who is willing to share my experiences—not for therapy, but to empower others and to seek to change things for the better. Lewisham bereavement counselling service tells me that it has a two-to-four month waiting list, and that just is not good enough.

I guess that now is the time for me to talk about and pay tribute to my little angel, Veronica. When I was 16 years old, I became unexpectedly pregnant. At first, I was terrified and even debated having her adopted, but during my pregnancy something changed—I became so attached; I was excited; I was going to be the best mum ever. Me and my partner at the time named our baby girl Veronica. We could not wait to meet her. I went full term and was 10 days overdue, so they had to induce me. I was in labour for a long time. I was sick, tired and in a huge amount of pain.

Veronica’s heartbeat was checked regularly and everything was fine, but once I was dilated, the staff checked for her heartbeat again and could not find it. This went on for about 20 minutes, checking with different machines because the staff were not sure whether the equipment was broken. Eventually, the doctor was called and I was rushed to the emergency room. I had to push, and forceps were used to get her out. The umbilical cord had been wrapped around her throat for the whole 20 minutes. She lived for five days, but we had to agree to the life machine being turned off. I got to hold her then for the first time until her heartbeat eventually stopped. She stayed alive for hours. I never wanted to let her go.

My baby awareness week is every year from 22 to 27 February—my five days of her being alive. She was never able to cry or to smile, but I loved her and I still love her. She is always in my thoughts—all these years afterwards—even if I do not talk about her all the time. I do not talk about her because I am embarrassed—I am not. It is because it hurts so much to do so.

After Veronica was taken from me, my coping mechanism was to chuck myself into college and work. I could not talk about it; my heart was broken. I do not have children now because I have lived with the fear of the same thing happening again, and I just could not go through it twice. I have to say that, as a young woman going through this, I felt as if most people looked at me as if I should be grateful—I was not and I am not. It felt like every organisation I dealt with gave me that same message. Every time I wanted to campaign to highlight the problems that led to her life being taken away so unfairly, I was treated like a kid, not a grieving mum. I was her mum. I also hoped that, one day, I would be her best friend. If she was alive today, she would be 23 years old. The pain does get easier to deal with over time, but it never ever goes away.

I really welcome this debate and genuinely pay tribute to Members for bringing it forward. I hope that, one day, no one else has to endure this pain. I want my experience to be heard by young women in my constituency and across the country who have been through this, or who may go through it in the future, and to just say to them, “You’re not alone.”

12.17 pm

Sir Nicholas Soames (Mid Sussex) (Con): I hope that the whole House will read the speech of the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) and feel that she has done something incredibly brave and courageous today. To my hon. Friends who have proposed this debate, I say that nothing but the greatest respect is due. To my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), who talked about this with such courage and straightforwardness, I say that all our thoughts are with her and all the other parents who have suffered these terrible losses.

I do not think that it is possible—having heard the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford I know that it is not possible—for anyone who has not suffered the unbearable tragedy of the loss of a child truly to understand the grief, the pain and the hopeless feelings that it must involve. I therefore warmly congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Eddisbury and for Colchester (Will Quince) on securing this very important debate.

I will, if the House will allow me, speak about two issues. For the past 15 years, I have worked with a wonderful charity in my constituency that is very close to my heart and I greatly admire. I am patron of Group B Strep Support. I first became aware of the work of the charity in 2003 when its founder and chief executive, Jane Plumb—a remarkable woman—came to see me to raise the issue of group B strep. Jane and her husband, Robert, lost their middle son, Theo, to a group B strep infection in 1996 less than a day after he was born.

I learned that group B strep is the UK’s most common cause of serious infection in newborn babies. It is the most common cause of meningitis in babies under three months, and also causes sepsis and pneumonia. It is truly shocking that on average in the United Kingdom one baby a day develops group B strep infection, one baby a week dies from group B strep infection, and one baby every two weeks survives with long-term disabilities. It is even more shocking that most group B strep infections in babies can and should be prevented. The parents of these precious babies and their wider family live with the consequences of their baby’s unnecessarily horrible illness for the rest of their lives.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman will know of the case of my constituents Fiona Paddon and Scott Bramley, whose son Edward tragically died at just nine days old from a group B strep infection. As devastated as they were and still are, they have channelled their grief into campaigning work and on a petition that has reached almost 250,000 signatures. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that there is an urgent need for more consistent and effective screening, and that the risk factor strategy by which we have assessed this infection to date has failed to reduce the number of instances and should be reviewed?

Sir Nicholas Soames: I certainly agree, and I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for talking to me last night. I look forward to working with him on this terrible illness and to joining him to present the petition when it comes along.

I have to say to my hon. Friend the Minister of State—he is not only my hon. Friend, but a real friend—who will be responding to debate, that what I have to say is not meant in any disrespectful way to him, but I have what can only be described as “issues” with the Department of Health about this matter. I have made representations on the issue to Governments of both
complexions, and it has been an uphill, pretty unrewarding and generally lowering experience. Since the time of an Adjournment debate introduced by the previous Prime Minister, the former Member for Witney, on 9 July 2003, I have dealt with five Ministers, all of whom have promised prompt action and progress, all of which has been unacceptably slow, for reasons that I, the charity, the families involved and mothers to be would find pretty hard to understand in any objective examination.

The campaign has been pushing since 2003 for the enriched culture medium test to be made available, and I would like my hon. Friend to note that the Government committed to making the ECM test available on the NHS from 1 January 2014, following a meeting we had with the then Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter), and the chief medical officer in December 2012, only to make a complete U-turn on the decision in the final weeks of 2013. Despite these setbacks and the dismal pattern of indecision, I want to congratulate Group B Strep Support on all that it has achieved to raise awareness of this terrible, unnecessary infection since its founding in 1996, and to ensure that the issue is at least on the agenda among the key decision makers, even if they do nothing about it.

The charity has one overarching objective: to eradicate group B strep infection in newborn babies. To achieve that objective, which is frankly military in its clarity and precision, the charity informs and supports families affected by group B strep, educates the relevant health professionals and pushes for improvements. The charity has virtually single-handedly raised awareness of group B strep from virtually nothing to a position where one in 10 new and expectant mothers had heard of it in 2006, and five in 10 new and expectant mothers had heard of it in 2015. Amazingly, the NHS does not routinely provide information about group B strep as part of standard antenatal care, which makes that a significant achievement for a small charity. The charity has covered for an inexplicable shortcoming on the part of the NHS.

From the very start, Group B Strep Support has pushed for improvement to policy and practice, and it has done an extraordinarily good job. It is my view that the reason for the shortcoming is a fundamental disagreement between doctors, and we all know what that means. It is not clear to me why Ministers do not simply override this and order the test, which would save lives, and spare the tragedy and agony of those involved. I know that the Government say that they are committed to finding a way forward, but it is taking them a very long time to get there, and neither I nor the charity are one bit satisfied by the progress. When my hon. Friend the Minister winds up the debate, will he particularly mention group strep B and give us some hope that that cause will be considered?

The most wonderful young constituent of mine, an adorable girl aged 14 named Emily McStravik, came to see me at my surgery 10 days ago with her mother. Emily is a miracle child who survived two strokes at the age of 18 months. I shall be sending my hon. Friend the details of Emily’s case and the wider case for dealing with childhood stroke, which needs to achieve greater prominence and understanding. Stroke is one of the top 10 reasons why children die, and an alarming number of children who have had a stroke are misdiagnosed or sent home. There is no greater honour or privilege that Members of Parliament can have than to raise on the Floor of the House a child’s story and talk about her remarkable courage and survival. I would be grateful if my hon. Friend would examine carefully the information that I will be sending him from Emily and her family.
When children lose their parents, they are called orphans. When a husband loses his wife, he is called a widow. When a wife loses her husband, she is called a widow. When parents lose their child, there is no name for that. The reason that there is no name for it is that there are no words. It goes against nature. And in other loss of loved ones, all those who knew and loved them can share memories such as the last holiday, the last Christmas or the last important family milestone, but it is not like that with a stillbirth, so people understandably do not know what to say. How on earth could they? Sometimes, people are so keen to avoid saying the wrong thing that they say nothing at all. I have heard reports of women after a stillbirth seeing their neighbours cross the road to avoid speaking to them, such is the discomfort and anxiety about saying the wrong thing, because there is no right thing to say. There simply are no words; just a deafening silence and a terrible sense of being utterly isolated in consuming grief.

Like so many parents who have lost their babies, my husband and I are haunted by the loss of how we expected our lives to be after five years of fertility treatment. We are haunted by the potential wiped away so cruelly, so suddenly and so unexpectedly; haunted by the fact that it was completely avoidable; haunted by the fact that all this grief and sense of waste was because the Southern general hospital in Glasgow, now called the Queen Elizabeth university hospital, made a series of basic errors; haunted by the fact that that same hospital pulled the shutters down and for six and a half years refused to recognise that any mistakes were made at all and to this day has still not done so; and haunted by the fact that that same hospital, despite independent experts flatly contradicting it, insists that it did nothing wrong.

And this matters. It matters because this is an all too common story and demonstrates an unwillingness openly to engage in a learning process when mistakes are made. That shows the real culture—a fear even—of improvement if people cannot accept it when mistakes are made. How many parents must go through this horrific ordeal only to feel swept aside, ignored, dismissed and told, “It’s just one of those things,” as they try somehow to cope with the crushing weight of grief?

As we have heard already, bereavement care for parents is simply not good enough. Sands has done very important work in this field, and I want today to pay tribute to it. As we have heard already, bereavement care for parents is simply not good enough. Sands has done very important work in this field, and I want today to pay tribute to it. How many parents must go through this horrific ordeal only to feel swept aside, ignored, dismissed and told, “It’s just one of those things,” as they try somehow to cope with the crushing weight of grief?

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are said to be preventable. The rate of stillbirth in the UK is higher than in Poland, Croatia and Estonia. The lives of 2,000 babies could be saved every year if the UK matched the best survival rates in Europe.

It is a great honour to follow all those right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken so far and shared such harrowing accounts of what has happened to them. In particular, I should like to praise—I do not want to appear patronising in any way—and to say how proud I am of the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), who is a good friend of mine, for giving her account in such a powerful and emotional way. I want to make it absolutely clear that I genuinely believe that we are doing something very special in the Chamber today. We are breaking a silence; we are breaking a taboo; and we are showing parents up and down this country that it is okay to talk about the babies and children we have lost. In fact, it is more than okay; where we feel that we are able to, we should. I hope that people across this country have seen today that there is no subject that we will not debate and talk about in the mother of all Parliaments if doing so will improve the lives of others.

Kevin Hollinrake: I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. On his point about inspiring people to come forward, what he describes is exactly what happened to Luke and Ruthie Heron, constituents of mine. Their son Eli was born after 23 weeks and six days. He lived for two and a half days further. Had he not lived those two and a half days, he would have been considered a miscarriage, rather than a short life. Grief cannot be measured in hours, days or weeks. Does my hon. Friend agree that we should reconsider the time criteria that determine when a life is considered a life?

Will Quince: Yes. I thank my hon. Friend for that contribution. The all-party parliamentary group is very much looking at that. He is absolutely right to say how important this is. There are people who have suffered what is currently termed a miscarriage when—let us be clear—we are talking about a life, a baby. However, because of our abortion laws and all sorts of other rules and regulations, we are not allowed to register that life and give that baby a name. We are certainly looking at that.

Mrs Hodgson: Lucy, my daughter, was born at 23 and a half weeks. Sadly, she did not live; if she had, she would have been rushed straight to the special care baby unit at the Royal Victoria infirmary. I always class her as a stillbirth, but officially it was put down as a miscarriage, and I was not given a death certificate, which was another trauma on top of the trauma I had already gone through. On paper, it was a miscarriage, but she was blessed by the chaplain while I was still in hospital, and we went on to have a funeral, which I felt was right; I had held her in my arms, and she was a fully formed baby. There is an anomaly that has to be addressed.

Will Quince: Indeed. I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady. Moreover, I thank her for the huge role that she plays on the all-party group, and played in its formation.

To come back to the point that I was making about the importance of today’s debate, we are really lucky—I hope that all hon. Members agree—to have the best job in the world. We have a duty and responsibility to try to use our experiences—some great, some good, and some terrible—where we can to make the lives of others better. Through this debate, we would like to, in the fullness of time, reduce the stillbirth rate and neonatal death rate by 50% and save the lives of 2,000 babies. That is an incredible target to aim for.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman and other Members on being so brave and speaking out in this debate. In the spirit of sharing experiences, friends of mine who were due to have twins sadly lost one due to twin-to-twin transfusion syndrome. Does he agree that it is important that, in the aftercare for parents who have lost babies, we consider the very different nature of, for example, multiple births, and ensure that care is tailored appropriately in all circumstances?

Will Quince: Absolutely; the hon. Lady makes a very good point. I will mention that a bit later. Charities such as the Twins and Multiple Births Association do incredible work in this field; one of my hon. Friends raised that issue earlier.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Following on from the point about mothers who experience late-term baby loss and the treatment that they receive in hospital, very often they are kept on maternity wards, which can be incredibly traumatic. The point was made about tailoring care and support for parents who lose their children. Is remaining on a maternity ward the most suitable option for them?

Will Quince: I thank the hon. Lady for that point, which I will come to in a moment.

Begging the indulgence of the House, I would like to share my experience, in the spirit of showing people outside the Chamber how important it is to talk about this, if we are able to. We found out at our 20-week scan that our son had a very rare chromosomal disorder called Edwards syndrome, a condition that is rather unhelpfully described as being “not compatible with life”. We knew throughout my wife’s pregnancy that the most likely outcome would be stillbirth, but our son was an incredible little fighter, and he went full term—over 40 weeks. He lost his life in the last few moments of labour at Colchester general hospital.

To pick up on the hon. Lady’s point, Colchester has a fantastic hospital that has a specialist bereavement suite called the Rosemary suite, where we got to spend that really special time—including before the birth, because we knew what outcome was, sadly, likely. I got to stay with my wife; we got to stay there overnight; we had a cold cot, so that we could have lots of cuddles. We could continue, the next morning, to spend time with our son. I completely agree with the hon. Lady, which is why my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) and I had a debate in November last year on bereavement care in maternity units. Bereavement suites are so important. In this country, in the NHS, there should never be any excuse for a mother and father, or a mother, who have lost a baby to go back on a maternity
ward with crying babies, happy families and balloons; that is just not appropriate or acceptable. Having gone through that experience, I know that what people need is the peace and quiet to come to terms with the personal absolute tragedy that has just happened.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman, the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) and all others who have been involved with the all-party group. When my child died at term, 23 years ago, we did not have a bereavement suite in Leicester, although we do now. The issue is not just parents’ ability to grieve and be with their child; it is also about getting expert help and counselling at that moment. My wife was told that she would never have children again after the stillbirth, but we had two children subsequently. It is so important to get that advice right at that time. Does he agree?

Will Quince: Yes, of course I agree. I will come to that point later. After the debate in November on bereavement care in maternity units, my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury and I were taken aback by the number of people across the country who got in touch and shared their stories with us. We sat down—this was during proceedings on a Finance Bill, so it was about 1.30 am—with the then Minister with responsibility for care quality, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Ben Gummer), my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), who is not quite in her place, and the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson). We thought, “This is a far bigger issue than just bereavement suites. The whole subject of baby loss needs addressing.” We were pretty surprised that there was not already a group looking at the issue.

The all-party parliamentary group was formed in February, and I am very proud of the work that we have done so far, working with amazing charities across this country. I cannot name some of them, because I would have to name them all. From large charities that do the most amazing work and fundraising, through to the groups made up of just a handful of people who get together in a local pub or village hall and knit really small pieces of clothing for babies who are premature and sadly stillborn, it means so much that so many people across this country want to play their part and make a difference.

I cannot let this speech go by without referring to the support of Mr Speaker, who is not in the Chamber at the moment, not just for this campaign, but in kindly allowing us to use his apartments for the reception yesterday, and during baby loss awareness week. Yesterday, which would and should have been my son’s second birthday, he called me to ask a Prime Minister’s question on this subject, and so raise the issue in front of millions of people and the country’s media.

Mr Kevan Jones: I know that the hon. Gentleman does not want to name individual charities, but Sands does a great job. The point raised with me by Ashleigh Corker, a north-east co-ordinator who lives in my constituency, is that one of the most powerful things that Sands can do is put parents with other parents—people who have gone through the same thing—so that they can share experiences. Does he agree that that is a very powerful thing to do? A lot of people can empathise with what parents are going through, but unless a person has gone through this themselves, it is very difficult to understand.

Will Quince: The hon. Gentleman raises an incredibly good point. In the run-up to birth, people can go to groups such as NCT and prenatal classes, so I totally agree. We have made friends who have gone through similar experiences. You feel that you can talk openly with them, because they have gone through very similar experiences and are feeling the same things as you. That is very powerful. There may be a role that charities and the NHS can play in putting parents—where they feel able—in touch with other parents who may want to talk about their experience.

I shall speak briefly about Government targets. I know that the Government sometimes get a hard time on the NHS, but they have accepted the premise of our argument. I remember first meeting my right hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich as Minister responsible for care quality—it was like pushing at an open door. We now have firm commitments to a reduction of 20% by the end of this Parliament and 50% by 2030. It is our job as an all-party parliamentary group to hold the Government’s feet to the fire and to make sure that they are working towards those targets and that we start to see results.

I could not let this debate go by without talking about some of the issues that charities have raised with me. I shall touch on prevention and then talk about bereavement. Research in this area is vital. As my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury said, around 50%—in fact, the figure is 46%—of stillbirths and 5% of neonatal deaths are unexplained. We need to look, for example, at ethnicity and ask why south Asian women are 60% more likely to have a stillbirth, and why black women are twice as likely to do so. Why is there a geographical disparity across the UK? I know that part of the answer is social inequality, but why is the figure 4.9% in some parts of the UK and 7.1% in others? That is around a 25% variation. It is not acceptable and we need to understand why it exists.

We need to look at multiple pregnancies, as the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) mentioned from the Scottish National party Front Bench, and at lower income families. We need to study our European counterparts and see why they are getting it so right and whether we can implement similar measures in the UK.

Some right hon. and hon. Members have mentioned public health and they are right to do so. Maternal age, nutrition and diet, drugs, alcohol and smoking are all relevant. We could achieve a 7% reduction if no woman smoked during pregnancy. That is a huge target to achieve and we could do a lot of work on smoking cessation, especially during pregnancy. Studies show that we could achieve a 12% reduction if no mothers were overweight or obese.

There is a huge piece of work that we could do on empowering women and mothers-to-be. Initiatives such as Count the Kicks are important. Nobody knows their body as well as a mother. If she feels that there is something wrong, there is a good chance that something is wrong. When she picks up the phone to the hospital or to her GP and her concern is dismissed with the words, “Don’t worry, it’s not important,” she needs to get it checked out. If there is nothing to worry about,
great, but on the occasions when we do not get a concern checked out and then something terrible happens, we have to hold ourselves responsible.

There are various initiatives to empower women. Teddy’s Wish is currently sponsoring fantastic folders—as anybody who has had a baby will know, mothers-to-be get purple maternity notes which they carry around religiously just in case the baby comes early. The wonderful plastic folders that the maternity notes go in inform mothers—and fathers—what to look out for, what are the signs if something is not right, when to pick up the phone, when to go and see their GP and when to go to the hospital. Such innovation is exactly what is needed.

Investigation and reporting are important so that we learn the lessons of every stillbirth and neonatal death. Covering things up and dismissing them with comments such as, “That’s unexplained. These things happen. I’m terribly sorry,” are unacceptable. We have to learn from every case. I am pleased that the Government have put a significant amount of money into setting up a system of reporting to enable us to investigate and learn from every stillbirth and neonatal death.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) rightly mentioned post-mortems. So many parents are not offered a post-mortem. One might wonder what parent would want that opportunity, but parents who lose children often want to know why. They want to understand how and why it happened and how they can make sure that it does not happen again. Offered the opportunity, many parents opt for a post-mortem because they know that that research can help others, but clinicians may not be asking the question—often with good intentions, because it is not an easy question to ask. We must ask the question if we are to get post-mortem rates up, which will feed into the research that will allow us to cut our stillbirth rate.

An hon. Member—I apologise, I cannot remember who it was—mentioned late-stage pregnancy scanning. In this country we do not scan past 20 weeks. We scan at 12 weeks and we scan routinely at 20 weeks, but there is no routine scanning past that. I find it bizarre that the abnormality scan takes place halfway through the pregnancy, but after that the mother-to-be is not seen again for a scan until she arrives at the hospital when she is in labour. Other countries across the world and particularly our counterparts in Europe do scans at 36 weeks or Doppler scans. There are huge improvements that we could make in that area.

I want to clarify one point in relation to prevention. The NHS is brilliant, and where we get it right in this country, we really get it right. The problem is the inconsistency across the NHS. I know that the Secretary of State and the Minister of State will agree when I say that we have some of the best care in the world, but it is important that that is replicated in every hospital and every maternity unit in the country, so that whatever hospital a woman goes into and whatever GP she sees, she will get the same level of care and consistent advice.

Even if we manage to achieve our target, even if we match our European counterparts and reduce our stillbirth and neonatal death rates by 50%, that will still mean between 1,500 and 2,500 parents going through that personal tragedy every year. That is why it is important that the APPG puts an equal emphasis on bereavement.

I have talked about consistency of care across the NHS, and there should also be consistency of bereavement pathway and bereavement care across the NHS. It is important that we consider aspects such as training for staff. I know that Ministers have put huge amounts of funding into training as part of the plan to achieve a significant reduction in the stillbirth rate.

Victoria Atkins: I am extremely grateful, as I said, to my hon. Friend for his part in securing this debate. I mentioned my constituents who had the nightmare of losing their baby boy. I asked the mother to write to me to set out precisely what had happened. Perhaps one of the most harrowing parts of an already harrowing story was when she told me that at the hospital she and her husband were not allowed to stay with the little boy for long. They were pressured to leave and when she was leaving the baby boy, she wanted to go back to say her last goodbye. She was refused. She collapsed to the floor and the officials around her said that if she did not get up, she would have to leave in a wheelchair or a stretcher, as it was time to go. Does my hon. Friend agree that kindness costs nothing, and that there is a duty on everyone, whether in the NHS or in the police, to make sure that when they are dealing with parents in such a situation, kindness is very much part of the way that they behave?

Will Quince: Yes, and my hon. Friend raises a good point. I only wish that the disgraceful behaviour and story that she has just related was unique, but sadly it is not. Reports from across the country and personal testimonies that I have read, sadly, echo such experiences. That is exactly what we need to address, and it is why training in this area is so important. Midwives and clinicians should be trained to deal with bereavement, including what language to use and what not to say. I will not repeat some of the things that I have heard said to parents who are grieving.

In our case, a stillbirth did not come as a huge shock, but let us not forget that many parents have no idea that such an experience, of stillbirth or neonatal death, is coming. It is one of the most emotionally sensitive periods of their lives and they are at their most fragile. My hon. Friend is right: it costs nothing to act with kindness, empathy and compassion. I would like to think that we can reach a point where those themes run through every maternity unit in the country. I know that that is the case in the vast majority of maternity units, but where we have instances such as my hon. Friend describes, they have to be ironed out.

I know that I am pushing your patience with regard to time, Mr Deputy Speaker, but I think that the bereavement point is so important. We must have bereavement suites and bereavement-trained midwives in every hospital in the country, and we need gynaecology-trained counsellors in every maternity unit. We also need ongoing mental health support, because the time a bereaved parent leaves the hospital is the not the end of their grief; for many it is just the start. Indeed, future pregnancies can be the most traumatic periods, because from the day they find out they are pregnant to the day they have a crying baby in their arms, they are thinking, “Is this going to happen again?” What mental health support is available? In some parts of the country it is fantastic, but in others it simply is not.
I want to make two final points. One relates to relationship support. We know that between 80% and 90% of relationships break down after the loss of a child, and that has a huge social cost. That is why mental health support is so important. I also think—this is one of the reasons I co-chair the APPG—that the voice of fathers must be heard. Fathers feel that they have to act as a rock, but in many cases we were there too. In my view, there is no worse experience than seeing your wife give birth to a lifeless baby. It is something that never leaves you. Every single day I think about my son. I think about what he would have been like yesterday, on what would have been his second birthday. I imagine a small boy running around our house, causing havoc and winding up his sisters. It is not to be, but every single day we live with that grief. Fathers need support too, as indeed do the wider family.

I want to end on a positive note. This is a hugely exciting time for us, because the opportunity for change is enormous. The APPG has made enormous progress since publishing our vision document, and I encourage those Members who have not yet seen it to find a copy—it is available online and in paper copy. What we have achieved since February, working with magnificent charities across the country, and with individuals feeding in their personal experiences, has been absolutely incredible. This is just the beginning of the journey, because we have just set out our aspirations and our vision of what we want to achieve. I know that we are pushing at an open door, because the Government want to achieve these targets too.

I want to send one final message to every parent who is bereaved up and down this country: we care; we are open door, because the Government want to achieve these targets too.

1.2 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow such an excellent and passionate contribution from the hon. Member for Colchester (Will Quince). This is such a sensitive and important subject. I congratulate him and the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) on securing the debate in this important week, and on speaking about their own personal experiences. I also pay tribute to those other brave Members who have shared their personal experiences so eloquently today: my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) and my hon. Friend—my very good friend—the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson).

In Hull the levels of stillbirth and neonatal deaths are higher than the national average. There is so much more that needs to be done, as we have heard. I want to put on the record my tribute to the excellent work in supporting parents of the Hull and east Yorkshire branch of Sands. I also pay tribute to the Lullaby Trust, under the inspirational leadership of Francine Bates.

I want to go back to the issue that the hon. Member for Eddisbury talked about at the beginning of her contribution: injustice. We know that the trauma of losing a baby can be compounded by what happens next. I want to share with the House the story of my constituents Mike and Tina Trowhill, who came to tell me about what happened to them. They explained that their baby son William had very sadly died in 1994, which was a long time ago. They were told at the time that when he was cremated there would be no ashes. Many years later, Tina discovered that William’s ashes had in fact been retained—they were never returned to her—and that somebody had scattered them without her knowledge. That was very sad and bewildering. Why would somebody do that? It soon became clear that it was not a one-off incident.

Tina has worked relentlessly in Hull and the wider area to help the many other families who have discovered that their baby’s ashes were not returned to them and were scattered without their knowledge, or that there is still a mystery as to where the ashes are. Tina set up the local Action 4 Ashes group, which now has 420 members. She has discovered that many families were told by NHS clinicians and nurses that there would be no ashes when their babies were cremated. Many families have since discovered that the ashes were scattered. Over 50 sets of ashes are still held by the Co-operative funeral service and have not been returned to the families. Cases are now coming to light in which babies appear to have been transported to the crematorium without the use of undertakers. Tina has helped families submit forms to the local authority seeking information about what happened to those babies. She has submitted over 50 such requests so far.

It is clear that this has happened not only in Hull, but up and down the country, for example in Scotland and Shrewsbury. The local authority in Shrewsbury recently held a local inquiry to find out what happened and get answers for local families. Tina and I decided to ask Hull City Council for a similar independent inquiry. Although initially sympathetic, the council decided that it was not willing to hold such an inquiry. We challenged that, stating that it was not okay for the local authority to investigate itself and that it had to be done in an open and transparent way. But the council said no. It was not willing to have that local inquiry.

I therefore raised the matter with the previous Prime Minister, David Cameron, and asked what he thought about it. He expressed to me that he thought it must be absolutely dreadful not to know what happened to a baby’s ashes and that something should be done. Eventually, Tina and I went to see the then Justice Secretary, the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), who I think was genuinely moved by Tina’s plight and by hearing about the many families in Hull who still did not know what happened. Tina made it clear that she wanted a local inquiry so that those families could get answers. On 10 May this year the Justice Secretary wrote to me, stating: “I am pleased to be able to tell you that my fellow Secretaries of State at the Department of Health and the Department for Communities and Local Government have agreed with me that there is a need for an historic investigation into the practices relating to infant cremations in the Hull area, and we have today jointly written to the Chief Executive of Hull City Council asking him to commission this.”

As Members can imagine, we were delighted to have three Secretaries of State acknowledge that the families in Hull deserve to know what happened. It was excellent news.

However, two issues rightly remained of concern. One related to jurisdiction. It was not just about the local council, which had responsibility for the crematoriums;
it was also about the role that the national health service had played. It was about the training needs and anything else that might come out of an inquiry. It was therefore important that the health service was involved. There was obviously an issue about how private funeral directors would be compelled to take part in any investigation. It was clear that there were some issues that needed to be addressed.

The other issue, which I had a lot of sympathy with, was the cost on holding an independent inquiry, which we know can be expensive. We also know that local councils are under enormous financial pressure at the moment. I supported Hull City Council in returning to the Ministry of Justice and asking for clarification and assistance on the two points of jurisdiction and available financial help. That all seemed to be going well, and I thought those were genuine issues that the Department would deal with.

However, on 26 September, the new Justice Secretary wrote to Hull City Council saying she thought there was no longer any need for an inquiry. The letter was not copied to me or my constituent, and I became aware of it only because the chief executive of Hull City Council sent a copy to me. I have to say, on behalf of my constituent and the many families affected in Hull, that I am absolutely furious that a decision made by three Secretaries of State was completely overturned without any consultation—indeed, without any attempt to consult me, my constituent or the Action 4 Ashes group in Hull. As Members can imagine, my constituent is devastated.

The letter from Hull City Council said the council had carried out investigations and was satisfied that everything that could be done had been done. Reading the letter, it was clear that the council had not really engaged fully with the problems around the NHS and funeral directors, and it certainly had not engaged fully with the families. In recent years, we have become a very much more open country, and we are less willing to take on trust the word of authority figures. Organisations left to investigate themselves rarely see the need for independent scrutiny of their actions; we only have to look at cases such as Hillsborough. Organisations that investigate themselves almost always find nothing much wrong and no one answerable for any error that is owned up to. “Nothing to see here. Go away. Move on” could be the motto of that culture.

The nearly 100 families in Hull who have come forward are not just going to go away and accept that they will not get the answers to their questions about what happened to the ashes of their deceased babies. A proper independent inquiry from outside the council—as they had in Shrewsbury—to ascertain whether more can be learned is the least those families deserve. If we do not learn the lessons of the past, there will be less confidence about whether measures proposed by Ministers to reform practices at crematoriums will be enough. I really do not understand what the Secretary of State for Justice had to gain by closing down the prospect of proper independent scrutiny of what went wrong in Hull.

In this week, in particular, I would ask the Minister to put himself in the shoes of those families in Hull who want answers and justice. There are three key demands. First, my constituent ought to receive an apology from the Secretary of State for Justice. Secondly, the Secretary of State should give her the courtesy of a personal meeting, just as the previous Secretary of State did. Thirdly, the independent inquiry into what happened to the ashes of the babies of over 100 families in Hull should be reinstated forthwith, with funding from the Government to ensure that it can go ahead.

1.12 pm

Victoria Prentis (Banbury) (Con): What an honour it is to follow that speech by the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson). She and I have worked closely together over the last year on difficulties relating to infant cremations, and I very much listened with interest to what she had to say.

When my son died, I was told by our consultant that, one day, it would be possible to put my grief in a box and open the box only when it suited me. Obviously, at the time, I thought she was completely insane; now I realise it is possible to have an element of control over lifting the lid in public—although it is not one I have exercised particularly well today.

Over the years, I have talked about my experiences to raise money for charities, including mental health charities, and I have learned that nothing opens those wallets quicker than a few tears. I have also trained hundreds of midwives for Action on Pre-eclampsia; midwives are fairly used to emotional mothers, so the lid can be fully lifted with them around.

It is an honour to be vice-chair of the all-party group and to have been there at its conception one very late night in the Tea Room. We have well and truly lifted the lid this week in Parliament, which is an achievement in itself. However, just as importantly, we have succeeded in enlisting Health and MOJ Ministers—certainly to date—to our cause. The emotion of the Secretary of State for Health was obvious to all yesterday, and I was pleased to see him here earlier in the debate. The charitable fundraiser in me did wonder whether, next year, we should ask a well-known tissue manufacturer to sponsor baby loss awareness week in Parliament.

In brief, my story is that, following two miscarriages, I developed severe pre-eclampsia and HELLP—hemolysis, elevated liver enzymes and low platelet count—syndrome during my third pregnancy 16 years ago. My son died soon after he was born, and for some time it was not at all clear whether I would survive. To put that in context, my father was slipped from this place at a time of enormous difficulty for the Government, which shows that my condition was clearly very serious. I went on to have two more children, now aged 15 and 13.

With your permission, Mr Deputy Speaker, I would like to touch first on learning points from my own experience and then on some of the work the all-party group has done this year, and finally to make some general points about maternity care going forward.

The learning points from my own experience are out of date, but, sadly, not all of these things have been put right—in fact, most have not. Obviously, physical care comes first where maternal and baby death is a real possibility. However, someone needs to be tasked with the mental care of the whole family, because the death of a baby, as we have heard, leaves deep scars in so many of his or her relations. Memories, clothes and photos make a real difference later, however much they seem like fripperies at the time. Putting bereaved mothers
in with live babies is simply not on, however ill they are. Explaining what is going on all the time is critical, and it may need to be done many times to different family members. Medical conditions have to be understood by those who are suffering.

Midwives, as my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) said, need considerably more than one hour of bereavement training. They also need training on how to have grown-up conversations on things such as lactation—conversations which were utterly lacking, in my experience. In fact, training all obstetric staff is important, as so many parents go on to have more children. GPs, who are often the first port of call, and other health workers, also need to be aware of the very long-term effects of baby loss.

It is difficult to go back to hospital with whatever condition in the future, let alone one to do with pregnancy. Where possible, parents should not have to tell and re-tell their story at every appointment. HELLP syndrome, which I suffered from, leads to multiple organ failure. I am not a doctor, and I do not really understand what is wrong with me, but if I go to the doctor with a minor condition, I have to go through the whole blinking story again. It would be easy to have a simple flag on my notes so that every time I have my blood pressure taken, for whatever reason, I do not have to re-tell everything.

Fathers, as my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince) mentioned, get ignored. We need proper evidence of the effects on relationships of babies dying. We have some evidence, which he touched on, but it is lacking, in my experience. In fact, training all obstetric staff is important, as so many parents go on to have more children. GPs, who are often the first port of call, and other health workers, also need to be aware of the very long-term effects of baby loss.

Access to mental health provision must be standardised, and good practice copied. According to Bliss, 40% of parents of premature babies need some mental health intervention. I would suggest that every one of those whose babies die needs at least an assessment. Relationship counselling should also be offered as part of an automatic deal, although I do not know at what stage that would be beneficial. At the very least, we need evidence on the effects of baby loss on relationships.

The all-party group is made up of individuals with different experiences and talents. My hon. Friend the Member for Colchester is excellent on parental leave. My hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury knows more than all others about pathways of care. My role this year has, sadly, been dealing with the issue of infant cremations, not least because of a constituency case I had. I am aware that the Minister is not the Minister who should respond on infant cremation, but it is important that we have a cross-departmental and joined-up approach to the issue, and I would welcome it if he could intervene or at least speak to the MOJ about it.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I have been horrified in listening to this debate. I have never lost a baby in my family, but I am horrified and upset. Surely for a mother who gives birth to a child, stillborn or not, that is her baby or the family’s baby, and surely she and the father should have absolute rights about what happens with the cremation and thereafter. I am absolutely horrified that they do not do so at the moment.

Victoria Prentis: I thank my hon. Friend for his helpful intervention.

We in the all-party group welcome the MOJ’s consultation and the subsequent response, which was published just before the summer. It seems that we are—I really hope we are—on the cusp of making some very important changes in this area. I ask that we push for those changes to happen speedily, because they are really important.

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for letting me intervene during her impressive and important speech. On the back of that comment, I want to inform the House that my colleague the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Dr Lee), announced last month the formation of a national cremation working group. It is now working with all interested parties, and it intends to take evidence from Members of the House. I strongly encourage all hon. Members with such an interest to participate.

Victoria Prentis: I very much thank the Minister for that intervention. We in the all-party group were thrilled about the formation of that group.

In that contest, may I give the House a few more examples from the response of the MOJ that we feel are particularly important to take forward speedily? We hope that the MOJ will provide a statutory definition of ashes to make it clear that everything cremated with a baby, including personal items and clothing, must be recovered. We hope that the MOJ will amend cremation application forms to make explicit the applicant’s wishes in relation to ashes that are recovered. Crucially—I know this point is very important for many Members in the Chamber—we hope that the cremation of foetuses of fewer than 24 weeks’ gestation can be brought within the scope of the regulation, where parents wish that to happen. There is some positive news in this very sensitive area.

Moving on to the future of maternity services more generally, my overriding constituency concern at the moment is the future of the Horton general hospital. In fact, if I am honest, it occupies most of my waking moments, and my children complained during our summer holiday in August that I cannot formulate a sentence without the word “Horton” in it, which I fear is true. This summer, I found the lid repeatedly lifted on my own experiences, as we have real safety concerns about the downgrading of our obstetrics unit at the Horton general hospital.

Since last week, a midwife-led unit remains at the Horton general hospital, but all mothers who might—might, not necessarily will—need obstetric care, which is of course the majority of them, have to go under their own steam or be transferred as an emergency to the John Radcliffe hospital in Oxford. In a blue-light ambulance, that journey of between 22 and 27 miles, depending on the route taken, takes about 45 minutes. If my labouring mothers travel in their own car—of course, not all of them have one—the journey can easily take up to an
hour and a half, depending on where they live and on the state of the Oxford traffic. The decision to downgrade the service was taken on safety grounds, as the trust had failed to recruit enough obstetricians, but I must say that I have severe safety concerns for the mothers and babies in our area. In 2008, an Independent Reconfiguration Panel report concluded that the distance was too far for our unit to be downgraded. As I see it, nothing has changed except that the Oxford traffic has worsened. I am keen, generally, that we start to be kinder to mothers during pregnancy and birth, and in my view, that does not mean encouraging them to labour in the back of the car on the A34.

We know that personal care leads to better outcomes. We need to take very careful note of Baroness Cumberlege’s recommendations in her “Better Births” report. She said that births should “become safer, more personalised, kinder, professional and more family friendly”.

We must use the impetus of events such as this week to drive through her major recommendations.

Chief among these recommendations must be the recommendation for continuity not of care but of the carer, which has been shown to reduce premature deaths by 24%. Professor Lesley Regan, recently elected the first woman president of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists for 64 years, has done a plethora of well-evidenced research on miscarriage, demonstrating again and again that a system of reassurance and continuity, with weekly scans and meetings with a midwife, has reduced the rate of recurrent miscarriage by 80%. That figure of 80% is for women who have miscarried three or four times.

My hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury mentioned the excellent work being done at Queen Charlotte’s as well. In this context, I am troubled that the sustainability and transformation plans might push us towards larger and larger units with less personal care. I may be wrong—I hope I am—and perhaps it is safer for such giant units to deliver the majority of babies, but I worry that in our case in Banbury decisions are being taken about my constituents without their views being considered and without real evidence of the risks involved.

Everyone in the House today is clearly committed to reducing baby loss, and I have never heard such emotion in a debate. We have evidenced-based research to show us how, in part, to do that. I refer the Minister very firmly to Baroness Cumberlege’s report. Yes, better bereavement care is important. Sadly, some babies will always die, as mine did, but let us really now make a commitment to reduce miscarriages and deaths from prematurity.

I need to be able to tell my constituents that they will not have to suffer as I did.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

1.26 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the excellent and very moving, yet very practical, speech made by the hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), who is making me want to cry as well. I think the idea of having a tissue manufacturer to sponsor this debate was quite a good one.

I pay tribute to the hon. Members for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) and for Colchester (Will Quince) for bringing this very important debate to the House. We owe both hon. Members and their families a great deal of gratitude for raising awareness about this issue through Baby Loss Awareness Week and their commitment to the all-party group.

I also pay tribute to the families who started Infant Loss Awareness Day back in 2002, and to the thousands of families across the country who continue to make a commitment to helping other families through their grief while highlighting the lack of maternity bereavement care in hospitals and in the community. As we have heard, thousands of families each year in the UK suffer the tragedy of losing a child. I hope that this debate may in a small way lead to their not having to suffer in silence and to their realising that they are not alone in their grief. This debate has raised many issues, some of which are uncomfortable, albeit very necessary if we are to change policy to help to reduce infant death, to save bereaved families from isolation and to make sure that the best possible maternity and neonatal care is available to everyone across the NHS.

Before I was elected to this place, I worked for the Pennine Acute Hospitals NHS Trust, which is based in the north-west. It performed some good work in this area, including by holding an annual baby memorial day for parents who had lost babies in the hospital. That was led by our excellent hospital chaplains, who perform such a good service for bereaved parents.

I was asked to attend this debate by my constituent Jane Casey, whose daughter Niamh tragically died shortly after her birth at the trust. Jane has still not received the root cause analysis of her daughter’s death from the trust and, 11 months after Niamh’s death, I am helping her to obtain the report. Jane says:

“The hospital has made me feel that my daughter’s life was not important. I am completely broken and find life a struggle. I keep on going because of my son.”

Those are such sad words, but they are typical of the examples that have been shared today. I really hope that this debate will achieve some practical steps to help other families to avoid such grief.

Health visitors, who have not yet been mentioned, play an important role pre and post-pregnancy. They can give support and practical help, but I feel that their role is undervalued. Since 2015, health visitors have been devolved to local authorities, but in that time there have been cuts to local authorities of nearly £200 million. The former Chancellor of the Exchequer announced a further £77 million cut in 2016-17 and an £84 million cut in 2017-18. The funding that was transferred with the health visiting services was not ring-fenced. I sincerely hope that, under the guidance of a new Prime Minister and Chancellor, the Government will consider protecting this vital service and investing more.

Staggeringly, 68% of local authorities do not commission bereavement support, and neither do nearly a fifth of clinical commissioning groups. This is a vital provision for families at their time of greatest need, and the failure to provide it is clearly apparent in our healthcare structures. I am pleased that NHS England is developing the children’s palliative care funding currency. That includes pre-bereavement care before a baby or child dies,
but it sadly overlooks bereavement care after a baby or child dies, so I hope that amendments will be made to that policy.

The Government and the House have the opportunity, by passing the Parental Bereavement Leave (Statutory Entitlement) Bill, which was introduced by the hon. Member for Colchester, to put parental bereavement leave on the statute book. It would give bereaved parents the entitlement to a leave of absence from employment, which is a common right across Europe. That would be an important first step in the right direction as the entitlement should be afforded to all at their time of greatest need.

Although mothers, fathers and families will never forget the children they have lost, baby loss awareness week is a chance for them to meet other families and share memories in remembrance. The collective sharing of experiences can begin the process of healing and alleviate a small part of the pain. The most powerful thing it provides is the opportunity to speak out and prevent other parents across the UK from suffering the same agony. We, as legislators, must act upon the words that have been spoken today in the House and create a better environment of support for bereaved families.

Finally, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) for sharing the tragic story of her daughter, Veronica. I am in awe of the bravery and courage she showed in speaking out today. Her bravery and courage were echoed in the words of the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), the hon. Member for Banbury and the two hon. Members who brought this debate to the House, whom I thank for giving me this opportunity to speak.

1.33 pm

Byron Davies (Gower) (Con): It is a great pleasure to participate in this incredibly important debate. I congratulate my hon. Friends the Members for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) and for Colchester (Will Quince) on securing it and thank them for the outstanding work they have undertaken on this issue through the all-party group on baby loss. I also thank the other hon. Members who have participated in that group. I pay tribute to the hon. Members for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) and for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) and my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) for their brave speeches.

I have known my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury for quite some time. We are friends and were Members of the National Assembly for Wales together. Indeed, we used to sit next to each other in the Assembly, and I witnessed at first hand the terrible devastation she faced when going through the loss of her baby. It is testimony to her courage and resolve that, despite her tragic loss, she is highlighting once again this issue that has affected some of us who are here today. It takes bravery to tackle the silence and stigma that used to exist around baby loss. She was instrumental in tackling it as an Assembly Member, and she has been instrumental in bringing this issue to the national stage and raising awareness for the tens of thousands of families who need help and support. I pay tribute to the outstanding work that she does.

In November 2015, the Secretary of State for Health launched the national ambition to reduce the rate of stillbirths, neonatal deaths, maternal deaths and brain injuries that occur during or soon after birth by 50% by 2030, along with the short-term aim of achieving a 20% reduction during this Parliament—by 2020. That was, no doubt, in large part due to the extraordinary work that my hon. Friends the Members for Eddisbury and for Colchester are doing.

In 2014, there were 3,245 stillbirths and 2,689 infant deaths in England and Wales. The death of a baby is one of the most traumatic events for a mother and father to go through and to deal with the aftermath of. The care that families receive afterwards is vital in helping them to cope in the long term with the loss of their child. That is why I am so pleased that this issue is being raised by my hon. Friends. Awareness is the key to reducing stillbirths and infant mortality, and to tackling the stigma surrounding the issue.

There can be no greater grief than that caused by the loss of a child. It causes psychological conditions that can last years and even a lifetime. The loss never truly leaves you, but how we care for families and individuals can make a huge difference to the future lives of those who live with such tragedy.

I have been through it myself. My wife and I have a wonderful son, but we also lost a child in the 1980s, when there was certainly a stigma around the issue—you just could not talk about it; it was taboo. It was almost an embarrassment to bring it up in public. We could not discuss the grief and sadness that we felt, and we did not have help to deal with what was one of the most traumatic experiences of our lives. It is a devastating experience. I am pleased to say that my son, who is now 34, and his lovely wife Natalie have presented us with a grandchild.

Having children is one of the most marvellous and truly happy experiences for a couple, and something we cherish. Yet, in a moment, we can go from one of the happiest, life-changing experiences to one of the most devastating. When you lose a child, you lose something for which you and your loved one have built a life for and around. You looked forward to going to sports at school, graduations and marriages, and in an instant that cherished future, that child and that happiness are cruelly taken away. I well remember that when we experienced that loss, there was no way to talk about it and all those feelings had to be bottled up. That never does and never can help the grieving process. We, too, were given medical advice to keep trying. I am afraid that that was not quite good enough at the time.

That brings me to the crucial point that, as with many mental health issues, we must communicate to everyone that talking about problems is always a sign of strength and never one of weakness. It is vital that we have the very best care, counselling and services for mothers who have experienced this agonising loss. They must be treated with kindness, sensitivity and respect in the hospital afterwards. It is also crucial that we support fathers who, while being strong for the mother and focusing on her needs, also have to bear the terrible loss.

As I have said, my family have experienced this at first hand. There is a great feeling of powerlessness and anguish when you see your wife, girlfriend or partner rushed into hospital and then into theatre, with no idea of the issue or the outcome, when all you are trying to
do is to start your own family. In an instant, the whole world, your family and your life spiral out of your control. You are a bystander to your fate and future, with no power to help your loved ones.

We must therefore ensure that the national health service provides counselling and advice, coupled with statutory leave, so that parents have the best professional support. With that in mind, I wholeheartedly support the efforts of my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester through the Parental Bereavement Leave (Statutory Entitlement) Bill. It is fundamental to guarantee that parents will have some time to grieve for their loss. To ensure that that opportunity is given, it needs to be on a statutory footing.

Finally, I am pleased that the Department of Health has conducted a survey to map the bereavement provision in England to build up a picture of current provision and identify where the gaps are. It is crucial to highlight areas of good practice and understand the challenges that services face. It is also crucial that the Government are increasing the number of midwives, and I hope that that leads to an increase in the number of midwives who have specialist training in bereavement. That should be a lesson to all our devolved Governments.

A Sands report found that fewer than half of doctors and midwives had had mandatory training in care for after the death of a baby. It is vital that staff are trained in caring for the psychological and physical needs of families, and in counselling them when needed. I hope that the Government commit to going even further in improving mandatory training and in supporting the need for statutory leave for families to grieve for the loss of the most cherished thing in our lives—a child.

1.40 pm

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): It is always with great care that one treads into some areas of one’s own life, but, like many hon. Members, I remember around that 21-week or 22-week point of pregnancy—obviously I am addressing the women Members in the Chamber—having that marvellous, magical moment of what the books describe as a fluttering. You suddenly realise then that the nightmare of morning sickness and the other afflictions that there often are in pregnancy are all about the new life there within you. I suspect that I am not alone in this but that many hon. Members of both sexes have had that moment of looking into the Moses basket and knowing that the next time you look into it that bundle of life that you bear will be in it. That is extremely exciting, and, the truth is, also really rather frightening, especially when it is your first child and so you have obviously never had a baby before. I absolutely cannot imagine what it must be like—something experienced by so many in this Chamber who have spoken today about such great courage—never to have that Moses basket filled with the joy of the child that you have borne for well over nine months.

I warmly congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antonette Sandbach) and for Colchester (Will Quince) not only on securing this debate but on the great work they have done. No one could have been unaffected and unmoved by the incredibly sad stories of the hon. Members for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) and for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson). If I may say so—and I do so with no sense of lessening the terrible story we heard from the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran—we were all particularly struck by what the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford experienced. I was not just struck with great sorrow, but, I have to say, I also felt anger rise within me. What happened to her was outrageous. I want to be made certain that what happened to her will never happen again to anyone in our society. Obviously, I extend that wish to the experiences related by everyone who brought to this place today either their own experiences or those of their constituents. We must learn the lessons from all of those experiences and do everything we can to make sure that babies do not die in the first place, so that we do not have the high rates of stillbirth that we have heard about or babies dying in the early months of their lives. But in addition, the treatment of both parents, as we have heard so eloquently expressed, must change.

I want to hold a spark of hope in my mind that what happened to the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford was a one-off, but sadly I have no doubt that it was not. But I would like to think that, given the passage of time, we can be confident that that kind of experience is now extremely rare. We must all work to make sure that no one ever again suffers what it did or what the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran suffered.

I will make a short contribution about bereavement suites. My remarks are based entirely on the experience of two of my constituents. I first met Richard Daniels for reasons with which I need not trouble the House, and he and his wife have now become friends of mine. Members can imagine, as can anyone who hears their story, that there was much sympathy and real concern at the discovery that when their baby Emily was born in a stillborn birth at the Queen’s Medical Centre, in 2013, there was no bereavement suite. I had both my daughters there; I found that fact quite astonishing, as I know everyone else did who heard their story.

Hon. Members have already discussed this. There is no greater tragedy for any parent than the loss of a child, and, although there are no degrees of grief, I genuinely cannot imagine any greater tragedy and loss than to lose a baby in the circumstances that we are all now becoming more aware of. And then—and, let us be honest, this is almost cruel—while the rest of us are celebrating with balloons and relatives coming along, to be there with that terrible grief, which cannot really be described if it has not been suffered, and to have to sit with your loved one while all that jollity is going on around you because there is nowhere to go to grieve, and to have your private last moments with your baby before they are properly buried, is just appalling. I was horrified to learn from my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury that 25% of hospital trusts still do not have bereavement suites.

I am not one of those who says that it is just the role of the NHS to provide those suites. When a terrible tragedy happens, whatever the role might be, what the things want to come together to make good of something that has been wholly horrible. I therefore have no difficulty in such circumstances with the idea of parents working hand-in-hand with hospital trusts that do not have a bereavement suite to create one.

Nottingham University Hospital Trust did much to make sure that when Richard and Michelle Daniels decided that they would raise money to fund such a
suite, it was a relatively easy journey. It was not all easy—there were many bumps along the way—but they got through it. They started with a plan to raise £25,000 and within 18 months had raised more than £150,000. They did so by a variety of fundraising methods that we will all be familiar with. Emily died in 2013. They finally opened the Serenity suite at the Queen’s Medical Centre, with real joy and pleasure, in April this year. Such has been their dedication to Forever Stars, the charity that they founded, that even though they said that the fundraising would end, as they have been contacted by parents from other parts of the east Midlands—notably, from Derby, where there is no bereavement suite—they have decided to resurrect Forever Stars. They are embarking once more on a huge fundraising exercise to open a bereavement suite. I urge them to continue—I know they will. It is right that parents are involved. However, it is equally right that all those hospital trusts that do not have bereavement suites should now get on with getting them. They should not rely on a parent who has suffered such terrible loss to spark them into taking action to make sure that those suites exist and are fully equipped and their staff are fully trained.

I offer my absolute congratulations to all those who have spoken, and in particular to those who have laid bare the worst moments of their lives. They have put those experiences forward so that we can say to the Government—and I know that the Minister will be listening—that this is an area in which it is time for action, for all the reasons and in all the ways that have been described, as it is not just about bereavement suites. We must take that action so that we can be proud, as a nation, that we are reducing the number of babies who are born dead or who die in the first months of their infancy, and we are doing the right thing by babies who are born dead or who die in the first months of their infancy, and we are doing the right thing by our health services.

I therefore support other Members who have called for better screening.

As an adjunct to the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester, who mentioned smoking and obesity advice for mothers during pregnancy, may I, as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on alcohol harm, ask that advice on drinking alcohol during pregnancy is added? The chief medical officer recommended earlier this year that the best advice is simply not to drink alcohol during pregnancy because, as the all-party group has heard, different mothers respond to different levels of alcohol very differently. There has been inadequate publicity regarding that clear recommendation, which I welcome because it clears up decades of confusing advice.
I should like to add my support for one or two points that have been mentioned. Finally, I want to mention one other issue that is still a taboo that we must bravely address and endeavour to break in this country. A quarter of a million miscarriages occur every year. As I have said, it is not only the mothers who feel the loss and grieve and mourn when a miscarriage occurs, but fathers, grandparents and the wider family. They need help too.

Statistics cannot compare with the power of personal experiences such as those we have heard today, but to frame some of the problems encountered by women who miscarry, I have a Miscarriage Association survey of 300 women. Forty-five per cent. of the women surveyed said that they did not feel well informed about what was happening to them physically; only 29% felt well cared for emotionally; and nearly four out of five—79%—received no aftercare at all. The association has noted that access to information and emotional support has been shown time and again to help people to cope with the experience of loss, but that we need to make such support available later if needed. The association has also noted that what was said to grieving women and men was not always important; it was just enough that someone was listening. By having this debate and hearing so many individual experiences, I hope the House has shown to the nation that we are listening and that we care.

Another issue that has been raised is how unborn children are treated before the 24-week stage. As we have heard, when a woman has had a miscarriage, she can be in an extremely vulnerable state. As my constituent has said, women are often not in hospital—in fact, only 18% of miscarriages occur in hospital. As such, a same early-care pregnancy unit. When I had a miscarriage to wards with celebrating families. Another problem issue of stillbirths has been raised, with people having people who have lost their child is not lost during pregnancy due to a miscarriage or stillborn, but due to a disability being diagnosed while their child is in the womb, leading them to have to make the often heart rending decision to have a termination, sometimes late in pregnancy. There is little, if any, bereavement support or adequate counselling for such parents either before they make that decision or sometime after, yet they too have lost a much-loved child.

Another told of how they were able to bathe their child they had had a funeral service, which helped enormously. We were also told of some examples of very good practice. One parent told us that examples of very good practice. One parent told us that they want it, which many do. We were also told of some counselling and bereavement care for such parents should be available for all parents who want it in such situations, even if it is some time later.

Fiona Bruce: The hon. Lady makes an extremely good point. It is vital that we support women in appropriate settings for their situation. As other Members have mentioned, for women who have lost their babies inside the womb but need to go through labour, separate wards should be a priority. They might need to be in hospital for several days. To hear other women around them with their babies must be very distressing. Hospitals need to create better spaces for women at all stages in their pregnancies in such situations.

Victoria Prentis: With your permission Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to share my own experience. As I told the House earlier, I was in hospital for a considerable time because I had been very ill. After I was in intensive care, I was put in a post natal ward with people with babies. I was in a separate room, but I had to share the bathroom, the midwives and all the other staff, with mothers of live babies. I found it terribly difficult when nice people who had not been told, who were bringing me cups of tea, food and all sorts of care, repeatedly asked me where my baby was. That was so distressing.

Fiona Bruce: My heart goes out to my hon. Friend. The compounding of grief in that way is so unnecessary.

Families who have lost babies have spoken about the importance of acknowledging their child’s life. Unfortunately, this is an area where the law adds to distress. Under current UK law, a baby is effectively only considered a person at 24 weeks. This often means that that acknowledgement is not there as it could be. I have even heard of parents lying about the gestation period in order to try to obtain a birth certificate. Alongside other hon. Members, I appeal to Ministers to look again at this. As modern technologies improve, unborn babies are increasingly viable earlier than 24 weeks. The law should move not only with technology, but compassion. I ask Ministers to look at that, too.

There is one last point I would like to mention. It is very sensitive, but I feel I need to mention it. It is the taboo I mentioned earlier, but as one colleague said, if there is one thing we can do in this House it is break taboos. Parents can also suffer a deep sense of loss and bereavement when their child is born with a disability. Parents can also suffer a deep sense of loss and bereavement when their child is born with a disability. Other witnesses were amazed that this kind of care was available, because they had received none at all. One of our report’s key recommendations was that appropriate bereavement support and counselling should be available for all parents who want it in such situations, even if it is some time later.

In 2013, the all-party pro-life group conducted a detailed, year-long inquiry into abortion on the grounds of disability. I have a copy here with me today. We were repeatedly told by witnesses about the lack of proper counselling and bereavement care for such parents should they want it, which many do. We were also told of some examples of very good practice. One parent told us that they had had a funeral service, which helped enormously. Another told of how they were able to bathe their child before the child was appropriately cared for following the termination. Other witnesses were amazed that this kind of care was available, because they had received none at all. One of our report’s key recommendations was that appropriate bereavement support and counselling should be available for all parents who want it in such situations, even if it is some time later.
I regret to say—I am following slightly in the footsteps of my right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames), who spoke earlier about an uphill struggle—that I have had an uphill struggle in trying to gain the attention of the Department of Health on this issue. I thank you, Members who have raised their losses in this debate. I hope now that the Department will consider it. Our report was issued in 2013. After the deeply moving Adjournment debate led by my hon. Friend, the Members for Eddisbury and for Colchester, I spoke with the then Minister responding to that debate. We agreed that I would send the report to the Department of Health after the debate, which I did. Unfortunately, I received no reply. I sent a reminder some time later. Again, I received no reply. I hope that as a result of today’s debate, the Department of Health will take seriously the additional point that parents in this situation need the same kind of care and support as the others who have been spoken about in this debate today.

2.4 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): First, may I apologise? I very much hoped to be here at the beginning of the debate, but we had a three-and-a-half hour meeting of the Home Affairs Committee. Due to very poor chairmanship, it dragged on. I was chairing it at the time, so it is entirely my fault.

I pay tribute to the hard work of my hon. Friend the Members for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) and for Colchester (Will Quince). I was lucky to have caught at the time, so it is entirely my fault.

This is a big and partly hidden problem. The rates of perinatal, perinatal and postnatal mortality in this country are appalling and shameful. We rank for stillbirths 33 out of 35 developed nations in the world. One in every 200 babies dies as a result of stillbirth in the UK, which is 15 times the rate of mortality for cot deaths, an area on which we have made huge progress. We have heard many statistics so I will not quote many more, but there is a 25% variance between mortality rates in different parts of the country. That is a cause for great concern in itself. We need to be doing better as a nation, but certainly we need to be doing much better for certain parts of the country that do not deserve to be lagging so far behind in the progress that has been made elsewhere. We have heard that is down to a whole host of reasons, including poor and patchy monitoring during pregnancy and a shortage of specialist midwives in some parts of the country, but at the end of the day 4.9 out of every 1,000 live births are stillborn. That figure must come down, because it has stayed stubbornly high for too many years.

I welcomed the Secretary of State’s pledge in March this year to seek to halve the number of maternal and baby deaths by 2030. If successful, that would save some 1,500 more lives every year. I welcome the progress made in giving out information and advice leaflets to all expectant mothers by week 24, but for reasons I will come on to in a moment, that is too late. We need to do better.

Smoking is a serious cause of baby loss. The self-induced poison of smoking during pregnancy, and in too many cases smoking excessively, has been attributed to 2,200 pre-term births, 5,000 miscarriages and 300 perinatal deaths. There has been progress and I pay tribute to the work done in this area. My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) mentioned the progress on foetal alcohol spectrum disorder. The all-party group, on which she and I serve as officers, produced a report on this recently. We have visited hospitals with the charity that promotes this subject to give clearer, better and more high-profile advice to women about what is acceptable and potentially harmful about the use of alcohol during pregnancy. Progress has been made, but we need a lot more. I contrast the lack of progress on baby loss with the great progress made on cot deaths. The very high-profile cot death campaign, some decades ago now, had a huge and very quick effect.

The brief we have received from Together for Short Lives mentions the appalling figures for bereavement support, which we have heard about—that 17% of clinical commissioning groups and 68% of local authorities do not commission bereavement support. This is not something that happens just in a medical environment; it happens when people are at home and maybe coming into contact with other council services, yet it does not happen in two thirds of local authorities. There is also the psychological and bereavement support in neonatal services, or rather the lack of it. The figures from Bliss show that 41% of neonatal units said that parents had no access to a trained mental health worker, while 30% of neonatal units said that parents have no access to any psychological support at all and one third of neonatal intensive care units, which look after the smallest and sickest babies, said that their parents had no access to a trained mental health worker.

This is not just about a bit of tea and sympathy from untrained bereavement support; it is about ongoing trauma. We have heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Colchester (Will Quince), for whom this tragedy happened some time ago, that it is still there. It is not something that leaves people, that they grow out of when they leave the hospital or that disappears when they are fortunate to have a healthy baby. It does not. People deal with it in different ways, with different levels of success or not, and those counselling services need to be available.

The figures for perinatal mental illness in this country are appalling. One in six women will suffer from some form of perinatal mental illness. Those are the women who are fortunate enough to give birth to a healthy baby, and we all know about the impact that attachment dysfunction can have on the child and the problems they may have growing up without a proper, good quality attachment with their primary carer. We know, too, from our report by the all-party group on the 1,001 critical days that the cost of not getting that right is £23 billion every year. It is therefore a huge false economy financially, let alone socially, not to be doing more about this at those early stages.

There are many charities that step in and help on this front, particularly with after-support, and we have heard some good examples. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) mentioned earlier, this is not just down to the NHS. A very good charity approached me recently called Aching Arms, which provides free
comfort bears to bereaved parents to support their mental health and healing after the loss of a baby during pregnancy, birth or soon after. Significantly, the bears it gives out are gifts from other families who have experienced the loss of a baby, so the parents receiving a bear will know that they are not alone. Each bear has a label attached with information about the charity and signposts to other charities from which bereaved families can seek support that is relevant to them. Thank goodness there are charities doing work like that, but frankly it should not be down to them to be relied on to provide what is some pretty basic, essential health and social welfare care to mums and dads at a point in their lives when they are particularly vulnerable.

What I want to major on—I thought my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton was going to upstage me earlier—is my private Member’s Bill, the Registration of Stillbirths Bill, which I launched in the House on 14 January 2014 with cross-party support. I want to resurrect my Bill and reheat its contents, because it has not come into law—surprise, surprise, for a private Member’s Bill—but it is just as essential now. Indeed, much of the evidence we have heard today shows why this is something we could do, without advances in medical science or huge costs, that could have a huge impact by giving some comfort and closure to the many thousands of our constituents who go through some of the experiences we have heard about today.

The private Member’s Bill I introduced in 2014 would have amended the Births and Death Registration Act 1953 to provide that parents may register the death of a child stillborn before the threshold of 24 weeks’ gestation. Twenty-four weeks is an arbitrary threshold. If someone happens to give birth to a stillborn child after 23 weeks, six days and 23 hours, that child never existed in the eyes of the state and is to all intents and purposes a miscarriage. If that child had clung on for another couple of hours and been stillborn beyond the 24-week threshold, it would be a child in the eyes of the state. That is an extraordinary anomaly in the law which we need to address.

As we have heard, some experience loss through miscarriage, often repeatedly, some give birth but routinely experience the pain of losing a child within days, weeks or months, and some go through all the trials and tribulations and the highs and lows of pregnancy, only to give birth to a stillborn child. The aim of my Bill was to help those parents. We have heard of the problems we still face, but the situation is made worse for parents who have stillborn children before 24 weeks because of the arbitrary nature of that figure. There are no central records of exactly how many babies are born in that way; they do not form part of the perinatal mortality figures; and therefore the position with stillbirths is actually even worse than we appreciate, because of those born before 24 weeks.

I do not wish in any way to downplay the importance and pain of a miscarriage, particularly for new parents struggling to have their first child, but those experiences are different. That was brought home to me most starkly by the story of a constituent of mine, Hayley, who came to see me back in 2013 to campaign for the change in the law that I then took up. Hayley was pregnant. For nearly 20 weeks, she carried the child of her and her partner Frazer. She felt the baby kicking. She went throughout all the other ups and downs of a first-time pregnancy, but sadly, after around 19 weeks, something went wrong, and Hayley and Frazer’s baby died unborn. It was not a miscarriage, and the following week Hayley had to go through the pain of giving birth to a baby that she knew was no longer alive. She had to take powerful drugs to induce the pregnancy. She experienced contractions. She went into Worthing hospital and had pain relief.

I pay tribute to Worthing hospital, which has the safest maternity department in the whole country. It has been rated as such by the Care Quality Commission and we are immensely proud of it. We are particularly relieved, given that many thousands of my constituents and I marched to save it back in 2008, when the idiot primary care trust thought we did not need a good maternity department at Worthing hospital. Despite having the oldest population in the country, if not the universe, in Worthing, we also have the best start-of-life facilities, and we are greatly thankful for that.

The day after Hayley went into hospital, she gave birth to her baby, Samuel—she gave him a name. She held Samuel in her arms. She and her partner took photographs, had his hand and footprints taken and said their goodbyes. Fortunately, Hayley was given good support by the clinical staff at Worthing hospital, as one would expect, and they had bereavement guidance. She has an understanding employer in West Sussex County Council and was also fortunate to find a sympathetic funeral director. The funeral took place two weeks later.

To all intents and purposes, Hayley, with her partner, went through all the experiences of pregnancy and the pain of childbirth endured by any other mother, but they were coupled in this case with the unimaginable grief of a parent who has lost a child before they could ever get to know him. She did not just go through a stillbirth; she had a still baby; she became a mum. The crucial difference is that Hayley and Frazer’s baby is not recognised in the eyes of the state because he was born before 24 weeks’ gestation. If he had been born after 24 weeks and one day, he would have been recognised and the death properly registered in a register of stillbirths, forming part of the statistics I referred to earlier. More than just adding to the statistics, though, that would have been the acknowledgment of an actual, individual life. To add further insult to injury, Hayley had to hand back her maternity exemption certificate straight after going through that experience.

When I launched that Bill, I got, as we all do, a wave of extraordinary, tragic experiences from mums and dads around the country, including one from a woman who had twins, one of whom was stillborn before 24 weeks. The other survived and was tragically born stillborn after 24 weeks, but in the eyes of the law she only had one baby. How absurd is that? That is why the law needs to be changed.

That stark difference surely cannot be right. It adds insult to the unimaginable pain that the parents have already had to suffer. Until the passing of the Still Birth (Definition) Act 1992, which amended the Births and Deaths Registration Act 1953, the threshold was 28 weeks, so prior to that even more babies went unrecognised in official records. That change followed a clear consensus in the medical profession on the age at which a baby is
considered viable. Since then, in fact, there have been cases of babies born well before 24 weeks who have, incredibly, survived.

It is true that there is an informal procedure for hospitals to issue so-called commemorative certificates for foetuses that are not classified as stillbirths. They provide parents with a certificate that records their pregnancy loss before 24 weeks; and Sandy, that excellent charity of which we are all in awe, has produced a template for a certificate of births which it encourages all hospitals to adopt. However, it is unofficial and still counts for nothing in the eyes of the state. Since that Bill, there has been a happy ending, because Hayley and Frazer had a bonnie baby daughter called Bonnie, who I am delighted to say is well and healthy.

My Bill would provide for the official recognition and registration of stillborn babies of below 24 weeks’ gestation. It would be based not on a crude time threshold of what is deemed a viable foetus, but on the experience of giving birth. Hayley and Frazer’s baby would be recognised as having existed, and Samuel’s death would have been registered, which would go some way to providing some comfort to parents such as Hayley and Frazer at an unimaginably painful time.

Antoinette Sandbach: The issues around registration and the line between miscarriage and stillbirth were very much brought up by parents in the online digital debate that we had on Monday. The difficulty of parents having to go to a registry office to register a birth and death of a baby also came up, as it is hugely distressing when parents have to explain what happened to a registrar. The Liverpool Women’s Hospital has the ability to carry out those registrations in the hospital; the Minister might want to look at that good practice. I am very much support what my hon. Friend is saying.

Tim Loughton: I thank my hon. Friend for that. The solutions are, frankly, not rocket science; a bit more sensitivity and common sense would go a long way towards alleviating an awful lot of pain and trauma.

The suggestions in my Bill, or a variation on my Bill, would go some way to providing some comfort to parents such as Hayley and Frazer at this difficult time. It would also provide more data to aid the analysis of why stillbirths happen and hopefully suggest what can be done to jumpstart a resumption of falling numbers from last decade’s plateau. For those who say that the physical act of registering such a child alongside those registering a healthy birth could open up wounds and exacerbate the parents’ grief—we have just heard that—I am sure that a more discreet and empathetic procedure could easily be devised. We could even do it online, you never know.

The Bill had nothing to do with changing the law on abortion. It did not propose to change the status quo on the entitlement to maternity benefits or bereavement entitlement, although I think official recognition would make it easier to secure appropriate empathy and flexibility from employers. The Government have already rightly made changes to maternity allowance guidance to ensure that mothers whose babies are stillborn after 24 weeks receive the benefits to which they are legally entitled; the process has been made easier.

The wheels turn slowly. I was making some progress with my Bill. I am particularly grateful to the former Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter), who with his own clinical experience recognised the problems in this area. He worked with me, with various royal colleges and others, and we had a big stillbirth roundtable at Richmond House at the beginning of 2015, involving the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, the Royal College of Midwives, Sands, NHS England, the Miscarriage Association and other relevant bodies. I think we found a way ahead in a hugely complex area that is not easy to solve.

A new law was introduced in New South Wales, Australia, whereby a formal recognition of loss certificate is issued in such circumstances, and it has official status. If we could investigate something like that, perhaps we could get back on track with this problem.

We are talking about something that should not happen and that medical technology and innovation are not required to solve. It is something that should not be subject to the restraints and constraints of funding that might apply within the national health service. We are talking about a bit of common-sense admin, but a really important bit of common-sense admin, for somebody who has had to go through this traumatic experience.

In paying tribute to the extraordinary testimonies we have heard today from people who are far more expert and who have had far more first-hand experience—mercifully—than me, may I gently ask the Minister to put this matter back on the agenda as part of improving the whole issue of baby loss? We could do an awful lot of good for an awful lot of our constituents if we could just get this one simple thing done properly.

2.25 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Members for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) and for Colchester (Will Quince) on securing this debate, and I pay tribute to their courage in speaking so movingly about the incredibly difficult circumstances that they, sadly, have experienced personally. It is a great tribute to their character that they responded to such tragic experiences by seeking to do all they can to help others. We have heard from many Members how their constituents have done the same, following their own personal tragedies. I commend the work of the Members who comprise the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss, which has made an important and valuable contribution, addressing both the prevention of baby loss and the importance of offering the best possible care to parents when this happens.

This is the first time that we have discussed baby loss in the Chamber, but the third occasion on which I have responded to a debate on the subject over the past year. Each occasion has shown the House at its absolute best. I would like to take a few minutes to go through some of the compelling contributions.

The hon. Member for Eddisbury talked about the lack of recognition of how miscarriages can increase feelings of loneliness and isolation. I was sorry to hear about the lack of understanding that some people have faced when they have been contacted having suffered a miscarriage. I know from my own experience that there is a propensity to put miscarriage down as “just one of those things”, as we have heard several times today. The hon. Lady made very powerful comments that most parents just want to make sure that whatever has happened
does not happen again. There is a recognition—a number of Members spoke about this—that parents sometimes do not feel that they get the answers they need.

It is disappointing to hear the statistic that the hon. Lady revealed that 25% of maternity hospitals do not have bereavement suites. Time and again today, we have heard Members welcome the provision of these suites in maternity units. I know from those I have visited up and down the country what a valuable contribution they make. They are often built following local fundraising and are often born from tragic circumstances. They always seem to receive significant input from parents who have suffered bereavements. I hope we are all agreed that we should aim to get a bereavement suite in every maternity unit.

As the hon. Lady said, one hour of bereavement training for midwives is clearly not enough, and the issue of training and support featured in several contributions. She is also right, however, that there is plenty of good practice out there, which we should disseminate across the country. Her comments about a bereavement pathway were important, and I am pleased to hear that Sands has been asked to look into it. I hope we will hear some good news about developments in that respect.

The hon. Member for Colchester spoke from personal experience with great passion and knowledge about what he believes needs to be done. He is absolutely right that no one who suffers a bereavement should have to go back on to a maternity ward. A number of Members made that point. He was right, too, to say that this is a far bigger issue than just ensuring that we have bereavement suites everywhere. We need to do much more work to understand why there are such disparities in occurrences across the regions and across different ethnic groups. His point that a mother can sense when something is not right was a powerful one. We should always stress how important it is to seek medical advice if there is any scintilla of doubt. The hon. Gentleman was right, too, that every stillbirth and every neonatal death is something that we should learn from. We need consistency right across the bereavement pathway and right across the NHS.

I wish the hon. Gentleman success with his private Member’s Bill, the Parental Bereavement Leave (Statutory Entitlement) Bill. We know that the odds of such legislation succeeding are not great, but perhaps today’s comments and the no doubt eloquent case he will make in support of the Bill will persuade the Government to bring forward legislation of their own.

My hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) spoke with her customary experience of the health service. She gave examples of some of the best practice in her constituency, but also spoke of the struggle of one of her constituents, Jane, who had been trying to obtain answers following the death of her daughter Niamh, and referred to the gaps in support throughout the country.

The right hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) talked about Group B Strep, which, he said, is one of the most common causes of infection. He told us that one baby a day develops it. That is a shocking statistic, given that, as we know, the infection is largely preventable. The right hon. Gentleman also mentioned childhood strokes and the courage of his constituent Emily. I look forward to hearing the Minister’s response to what he said.

The hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) has her own personal experience. She very bravely told us about Kenneth, who would have been seven on Saturday. She rightly made the point that people often do not know what to say in such circumstances, and end up saying nothing at all. We hope that the more Members talk about these issues, the less often such situations will arise. The hon. Lady also said that the response that she had received that it was “just one of those things” was not good enough. She talked about the culture of secrecy and the pulling down of shutters, which cannot possibly help bereaved parents who are looking for answers.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) raised an important issue about her constituent’s son William, whose ashes had been scattered without the constituent’s acknowledge. She talked about her campaign to get Hull council to conduct an independent inquiry into what is apparently a widespread practice in Hull. The campaign was initially successful, and my hon. Friend is right to be furious about the U-turn that has now taken place, with no consultation or warning. We certainly support her campaign to have the inquiry reinstated, and I hope that the Minister will agree to look into the matter and make representations to the Secretary of State for Justice.

The hon. Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis) spoke, very bravely, about her personal experiences. She observed that we often hear that the nature of the public’s interaction with many public services means that people must tell their story again and again. She stressed the importance of relationship counselling, or, at the very least, an evaluation of how bereavement affects relationships. She also spoke with great knowledge about the importance of getting cremations right. I was pleased to hear that a working group is now looking into that.

The hon. Member for Gower (Byron Davies) said that awareness was the key to tackling this issue. He spoke with great sincerity about the fact that he and his wife had felt that they could not speak about their own loss, such was the stigma surrounding it. He rightly said that the medical advice that they were given at the time to “keep trying” was simply not acceptable.

The right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) talked about her constituents’ daughter Emily, who was stillborn, and their subsequent discovery that there was no bereavement suite. She said that it was almost cruel for bereaved parents to have to be in close proximity to those who had experienced successful births, and I think we can all understand that sentiment.

The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) highlighted the experience of her constituents, and the lack of joined-up communication in dealings with bereaved parents. She gave some disturbing statistics from a miscarriage survey which found that four out of five women received no aftercare at all. I think it is clear to all of us, given what we have heard today, how important it is for that support to be provided as often as possible.

The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) spoke with great knowledge of this subject. He mentioned the shocking statistic that 68% of local authorities do not commission bereavement support,
and presented a volley of other statistics revealing a lack of access to mental health support across the board. As he said, this is not something that just fades away; support is needed from the very first moment. He paid tribute to the many charities that provide such support, but rightly said that people should not have to rely on charities to receive it. He also drew attention to his own private Member’s Bill, and to the legal absurdity of the classification of births before 24 weeks. He made, I think, a compelling case for a change in the law.

Finally, let me pay tribute to the outstanding contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft), who showed incredible courage in telling us about her daughter Veronica. We could all feel the pain that she must have felt every day for the last 23 years, and we all admire her bravery in talking about her experience. I am sure that Veronica would be as proud of her mum as we all are today.

As we have heard, this debate coincides with baby loss awareness week, which provides an opportunity for bereaved parents, their families and their friends across the world to unite and commemorate their babies’ lives. I echo the tributes that have been paid to the many charities that do so much to support families through what is possibly the most challenging time that they will ever face. I do not think that any Member can be in any doubt about how difficult it is, having heard the moving speeches that have been made today. I know that the hon. Member for Colchester did not want to single out particular charities, but I shall name four: Sands, Bliss, the Miscarriage Association and Antenatal Results and Choices all do excellent work.

It is a demonstration of the importance of this issue that in baby loss awareness week—as in every week—we know that more than 100 families will experience one of the biggest tragedies of their lives. An average of 15 stillbirths occur each and every day. We have heard from Members that stillbirth is often a taboo subject that many find difficult to discuss. I think we are beginning to change that, but we owe it to all those families to address the issue, and I know that today’s debate is a valuable part of the process. The loss of 100 lives a week in any circumstances is a tragedy, and if it were happening in a particular industry, there would no doubt be calls for action to be taken. That is why the words of the Members who have spoken today about their personal experiences are as important as they are brave.

I followed with great interest Monday’s baby loss debate on Twitter, and I commend the hon. Members for Eddisbury and Colchester for their innovation in facilitating it. The debate offered members of the public from all over the country an opportunity to share their views about this issue, and I want to put on record my thanks to everyone who took part. Twitter and social media generally have gained a bit of a reputation over the last few years for being unforgiving and cruel domains, but Monday’s debate showed how that arena can be harnessed to bring about genuinely thoughtful and meaningful engagement with the public.

One of the key themes that emerged from the debate was the fact that this country offers some of the best neonatal care in the world, along with some exemplary psychological and bereavement support services. However, it also made clear that—as we have heard from many Members today and in the past—it does not offer that excellent care equally in every area. There is a great deal of variation across the country, which is why, much to our shame, our rates of stillbirth are unacceptable in comparison with those of similar countries. There has been an enormous amount of progress in reducing the rates of stillbirths and infant deaths in the last century, but it has sadly stalled in recent years. Indeed, according to the Lancet, the annual rate of stillbirth reduction in the UK has been slower than those in the vast majority of high-income countries. Our annual rate of reduction has been 1.4%, compared with 6.8% in the Netherlands. I think we would all agree that that is not an acceptable level of progress, and variability may well be one of the key reasons for it.

We welcome the Government’s commitment to reducing the rate of stillbirths, neonatal deaths, maternal deaths and brain injuries that occur during or soon after birth by 20% by the end of this Parliament, and by 50% by 2030. During the debate that took place in June, the former Minister, the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), confirmed that the first annual report on progress towards meeting those targets was due to be published this autumn. I should be grateful if the Minister would tell us whether that is still the Government’s intention, and when we can expect to see the report.

If we are to see a reduction in the number of avoidable deaths, another key priority, which is linked to the variability of care, is to ensure that there are safe staffing levels in neonatal units. According to the “Bliss baby report 2015: hanging in the balance”, 64% of neonatal units do not have enough nurses to meet national standards, and 70% of neonatal intensive care units regularly look after more babies than is considered safe. Given the strong evidence of a link between staffing levels and babies’ mortality, I ask the Minister to set out what steps the Government are taking to address that. We shall simply not be able to achieve the Government’s laudable ambitions if we cannot provide safe staffing levels in neonatal units.

Another issue that was raised during the debate in June was the investigation of stillbirths. At present, coroners do not have the jurisdiction to investigate the deaths of children who are stillborn to try to understand exactly why the deaths occurred and to inform best practice. As we have heard from many Members today, parents simply want to know what went wrong and whether it will happen again. Members of all parties were encouraged when the previous Minister undertook to discuss expanding the remit of coroners with his counterpart in the Ministry of Justice. I should be grateful if the Minister could tell us how those discussions have gone.

Let me end my speech by focusing on the families who so vividly experience bereavement, and the care and support that is offered to them afterwards. This is another area in which, sadly, there is a great deal of variability, with some families receiving the levels of support and care that we would expect while others have had shocking experiences such as those about which we have heard today. I should be grateful if the Minister could outline the steps that he will take to realise the Government’s commitments on parity of esteem for mental health in neonatal care. No one who has suffered the trauma of losing their baby should be left to suffer alone.

Members in all parts of the House have spoken very bravely and with great passion about their personal experiences. I hope that, following the debate, we shall...
be able to move forward, continue to break down the taboos, and ensure that every family to whom this happens receives the very best care, both medically and in terms of bereavement support. Families experiencing the very worst of times deserve a system that offers them the very best.

2.40 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): I am humbled to be responding to this debate. It is undoubtedly the most moving debate that I have participated in during the 11 and a half years I have been in the House and I pay an enormous tribute to all those who have spoken, particularly those who spoke of their own personal experiences. I shall touch on that further in a few moments. I want to start by congratulating my hon. Friends the Members for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) and for Colchester (Will Quince) on initiating this debate during baby loss awareness week. I also commend them on the remarkable progress they have made in launching the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss and on securing cross-party support for it. The group has had an unusually large impact compared with the plethora of other groups, and it has managed to achieve a Commons Chamber debate within a few months of being set up. That is an unusual and impressive achievement by them and the other officers of the group on both sides of the House.

Yesterday, hon. Members from across the House showed tremendous support for the work of the group. This was evidenced by the support from Mr Speaker in hosting a reception in his state rooms which was attended by many of the 21 pregnancy and baby loss charities that are dedicated to arranging support and care for families that go through this terrible experience. Events such as those that have taken place throughout the week here in the House—and indeed on Twitter, as the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) mentioned earlier—help to raise awareness for the families who suffer this loss, often in silence. One of the things that has struck me most about this debate is the determination of those who have experienced such loss, either directly or through their families or constituents, not to allow the issue to remain in the closet.

I would like to address some of the comments that have been made and to applaud the contributions and interventions that we have had today from the more than 30 hon. Members who have spoken of their own personal experiences and those of their constituents. Interestingly, although we have had contributions from 17 Back-Bench women, we have also had contributions from 13 Back-Bench men, some of whom have had personal direct experience as well. Particularly moving have been the contributions from Members who have not raised their experience of this issue in public in this place before. They included the hon. Members for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft) and for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis)—she might have mentioned it before, but she made another moving contribution today—my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Byron Davies) and the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan). Such personal testimony obviously touches the heartstrings of everyone who hears it, and there was barely a dry eye in the House when they were speaking. I pay tribute to their courage in making so clear the pain that they went through, either recently or some years ago. Foremost among those Members are my hon. Friends the Members for Eddisbury and for Colchester, who brought this matter so vividly to our attention with their speeches nearly 12 months ago.

I shall not go through every contribution that has been made today, but I shall try to refer to many of them in my remarks. In particular, I should like to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston for his very thoughtful contribution and for the spirit in which he made it. I shall try to address most of his questions as I continue. Before I forget, I should like to address the question put by my right hon. Friend the Member for Crawley—

Sir Nicholas Soames: Mid Sussex.

Mr Dunne: I am sorry. Have I got it wrong again?

My right hon. Friend the Member for Mid Sussex (Sir Nicholas Soames) asked about progress on screening for group B streptococcus, and I can reassure him that the UK national screening committee is reviewing its recommendation on antenatal screening for GBS carriage as part of its three-yearly review cycle. It will be taking new published evidence into account. We are anticipating that a public consultation will be held on this topic shortly, and I am sure that my right hon. Friend will want to participate in it. Once it has been concluded, we will review the recommendations that emerge.

The loss of a baby is clearly devastating for its parents and the family, regardless of when or how the death occurs. Those experiencing the heartbreak of miscarriage, stillbirth, the death of an infant or the decision to terminate a much-wanted pregnancy need our support and kindness, and the acknowledgement that their child was here for a short time and was loved. I have been deeply struck by the comments about the lack of sensitivity that can occur when such a loss takes place, and it is absolutely right that the Department of Health should encourage best practice across the NHS in order to minimise the distress caused by insensitive conduct on the part of those involved in supporting families at this time.

Such feelings of loss are real, but as has been said, in particular by my hon. Friend the Member for Gower, who explained this dispassionately and clearly, the issues are often not discussed. Many of us do not realise that on an average day in England around 32 women will be diagnosed with an ectopic pregnancy, 15 babies will be stillborn and eight babies born on that day will die before their first birthday. Most of those infants will probably be less than a month old. It is therefore important that we in Parliament discuss the issues around baby loss and the care for those families experiencing such tragedies.

I want to talk about the steps we are taking with the NHS to reduce stillbirths and other adverse maternity outcomes. I also want to talk about what we are doing to support families who experience this loss. England is a very safe country in which to have a baby, and it is encouraging that the stillbirth rate in England has fallen from 5.2 per 1,000 births in 2011 to 4.4 in 2015. In 2014, the neonatal mortality rate was 2.5 deaths per 1,000 births, and the rate of deaths in babies aged 28 days to
one year was 1.1 per 1,000 births. Those rates have been steadily declining and are now at their lowest levels since 1986. There is, however, as we have clearly heard from several contributions today, more that we can do, and, as a Government, we are determined to do so.

It is important that we do not accept all miscarriages, stillbirths, pregnancy terminations or neonatal deaths as inevitable, or simply nature taking its course, as has been touched on by a couple of contributions today, because many of them might have been prevented.

When compared with similar countries, our stillbirth rates remain unacceptable. In the stillbirth series of The Lancet, which was published earlier this year, the UK was ranked 24th out of 49 high-income countries. The same publication showed that the UK’s rate of progress in reducing stillbirths has been slower than that of most other high-income countries. The annual rate of stillbirth reduction in the UK was 1.4% compared with 6.8% in the Netherlands. That places us, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Grantham and Stamford (Nick Boles) emphasised, many reports have highlighted that we do not effectively learn from our mistakes. Indeed, the guidelines of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists state that all stillbirths should be reviewed in a multi-professional meeting using a standardised approach on analysis for substandard care and future prevention. That is something that we would like to see taken up.

We must view individual failings as important and recognise the need for accountability, but balance that with a need to establish standard processes that can prevent avoidable mistakes from happening again. In April we established a new independent healthcare safety investigation branch to carry out investigations and share findings. The HSIB will operate independently of Government and the healthcare system to support continuous improvement by using the very best investigative techniques from around the world, as well as fostering learning from staff, patients and other stakeholders.

An important improvement in maternity care is care that is more collaborative and responsive to the needs of women. Several Members referenced the investigations by Sands, the stillbirth and neonatal death charity, which has revealed that 45% of women who raised a concern with a health professional during pregnancy were not listened to and then went on to have a stillbirth. Clearly, that is not acceptable. All women should receive safe, personalised maternity care that is responsive to their individual needs and choices.

The hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston asked where we are on supporting those with mental health conditions through pregnancy. I draw his attention to the announcement in January in which the Government set out that an additional £290 million will be made available over the next five years to 2020-21 to invest in perinatal mental health services. That is funded from within the Department of Health’s overall spending review settlement, and it will go a long way to providing support for women who are pregnant and need mental health counselling both before and after birth.

Last November we asked the national patient safety campaign Sign up to Safety, which was launched by the Government in 2014, to support all NHS trusts with maternity services to develop plans to improve safety and share best practice. In March this year we launched “Spotlight on Maternity”; with guidance for maternity services to improve maternity outcomes. This set out five high-level themes that are known to make maternity care safer that services could focus on: building strong clinical leadership; building capability and skills for all staff; sharing progress across the system; improving data capture and knowledge; and improving care for women with perinatal mental health problems.

In February this year, “Better Births”, the report of the independent national maternity review that was chaired by Baroness Cumberlege, was published, and hon. Members have touched on it today. It sets out that the vision is for maternity services across England to
become safer, more personalised, kinder, more professional and more family-friendly. The Department of Health is leading the promoting good practice for safer care workstream of the maternity transformation programme that was launched last July to deliver the vision set out by the national maternity review, and we will set out our action plans shortly.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury highlighted, it is vital that we support research into the causes of stillbirths and neonatal deaths so that we can better understand how to identify babies at risk and improve services. In recent years, the Government have invested in research, looking at important questions regarding stillbirths and neonatal deaths. From 2012, the National Institute for Health Research biomedical research centres at Cambridge and Imperial College have invested £6 million over five years in research on women’s health, including research to increase understanding of the causes of still births and neonatal deaths. We continue to encourage research bids for new studies that will help us to identify babies at risk.

The evidence shows that this stretching ambition cannot be achieved through improvements to NHS maternity services alone. The public health contribution will be crucial. As The Lancet stillbirth series concluded, some 90% of stillbirths in high-income countries occur antenatally and not during labour.

We heard from a number of hon. Members about the need to do more to highlight risks during pregnancy so that women are aware of what they can do while they are pregnant to minimise the risks. When starting pregnancy, not all women will have the same risk of something going wrong, and women’s health before and during pregnancy is one of the factors that influence rates of stillbirths, neonatal deaths and maternal deaths. We know that a BMI of over 40 doubles the risk of stillbirth, that a quarter of stillbirths are associated with smoking, and that alcohol consumption is associated with an estimated 40% increase to stillbirth risk. In addition, the MBRRACE—Mothers and Babies: Reducing Risk through Audits and Confidential Enquiries—report published in June last year showed that women living in poverty had a 57% higher risk, babies from BME groups have a 50% higher risk, and teenage mothers and mothers over 40 have a 39% higher risk.

**Tim Loughton:** I sense that the Minister is coming to the end of his speech—if you have anything to do with it, Madam Deputy Speaker. Will he give me a guarantee that he will look into the registration of stillbirths? He has not mentioned that yet.

**Mr Dunne:** I will come back to my hon. Friend. Friend’s point just as I conclude.

These striking facts are why the Department of Health will continue to work closely with Public Health England and voluntary sector organisations to help women to have a healthy pregnancy and families to have the best start in life. A new information campaign will be launched shortly, and I encourage all hon. Members to support it during the launch period.

I would like to say a few words before I conclude about the importance of delivering good bereavement care for those families who have experienced baby loss, which was a topic raised by many hon. Members. Having not gone through the experience myself, I can scarcely comprehend how devastating it must be for parents to lose a baby. It is important that parents receive appropriate care and support as sensitively as possible when that occurs. The MBRRACE report that I referenced stated that 60% of parents currently receive a high standard of bereavement care, but that clearly leaves 40% who do not, which is not good enough.

Since 2010, we have invested £35 million in the NHS to improve birthing environments, including better bereavement suites and family rooms at some 40 hospitals, to support bereaved families. I have seen some of those rooms, including the superb suite opened last month in the Medway Maritime hospital, which I think was one of those that indicated that it did not have such a suite when my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury undertook her research. We have heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) about the recent improvement in Nottingham.

We have been working with Sands, the Miscarriage Association, the Lullaby Trust and others to understand the challenges that maternity services face and to highlight areas of good practice. I am pleased that the all-party group’s report, which was published this week, recognises the work that we are supporting to develop an overarching bereavement care pathway to help to reduce the variation in the quality of bereavement care provided across the NHS.

In response to the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) in his intervention and elsewhere during the debate, I should like to say that I have been impressed by comments made about the distress caused by the registration of post-24 week baby loss, often in the same place where mothers with young babies are registering births. I can well imagine that that compounds the sense of grief. It is appropriate that we look at best practice and the common-sense delivery of registration to see whether it could be spread more widely, so I will ask officials to look at that, but I am not promising legislation.

I again thank all hon. Members for participating in the debate and their deeply moving contributions. In particular, I thank those who secured the debate for their work in driving the all-party group and raising awareness across the nation. It is important that we as a Government try to drive an improvement in outcomes, and I reassure hon. Members that the Government are fully committed to reducing the number of babies who die during pregnancy or in the neonatal period, and to supporting those families who are bereaved. Although the Baby Loss Awareness Week events here in Westminster culminate with today’s important debate, other events are continuing to take place throughout the United Kingdom and internationally. I should like to encourage everyone to join in the global wave of light, which we heard about earlier this afternoon, by lighting a candle at 7 o’clock this Saturday 15 October and letting it burn for one hour in remembrance of all the babies who have died during pregnancy or at, during or after birth.

3.2 pm

**Antoinette Sandbach:** I want to pay a huge tribute to my colleagues, particularly the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Vicky Foxcroft). I know that it is incredibly hard when we sit in this place to decide whether we want to put something that is a deeply personal piece of
our lives into the public domain. Any parent who is dealing with child loss deals with the same dilemma. Do they talk to their employers? Do they talk to their friends? Do they explain what has happened?

I therefore thank the hon. Lady and all other colleagues: the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), my hon. Friend the Member for Banbury (Victoria Prentis), the hon. Members for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) and for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady), and my hon. Friends the Members for Gower (Byron Davies) and for Colchester (Will Quince). We were not aware a year ago where this path would take us. I am grateful for the fact that we are breaking the silence about child loss. We need professionals in the NHS to break the silence about child loss, too. That way, we will get real change.

I certainly will join the wave of light on Saturday. There is a series of awards called the Butterfly awards whereby people can nominate good practice in their local hospitals, or a local blogger or small charity that has made a difference in this field. I urge hon. Members to think about nominating people they know for next year. I will be there, listening to the awards. I will certainly be lighting a wave of light candle, and I know that many others will, too.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Before I put the Question, I should like to commend everyone who has taken part in this extraordinary debate, many of whom have shown incredible courage in talking about sensitive personal issues. Those who criticise this Chamber and the way it works should pay a bit of attention to how powerful it is when it operates as a unique forum for national debate, and how effective it is when it operates at its best, as it has done this afternoon.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered baby loss.

Hormone Pregnancy Tests

3.5 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House notes that an Expert Working Panel Group Inquiry was set up by the Government to investigate and assess evidence on children born with serious deformities due to hormone pregnancy test drugs taken by expectant mothers between 1953 and 1975; further notes with concern that the terms of reference as set out by the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency do not clearly allow for an investigation into the systematic regulatory failures of government bodies at the time; notes the conflict of interest of some panel members; further notes that all evidence must be presented to expert panel members as set out in the terms of reference; calls on the Inquiry to ensure that all evidence is presented to the expert panel with sufficient time for due consideration; further calls on the Inquiry to guarantee thorough background checks on all panel members; calls for the terms of reference to be amended to include an investigation into the conduct of the Committee on Safety of Medicines; further calls on the Government to ensure that the Inquiry has the trust and confidence of the victims for whom it was set up; and believes that, unless these changes are made, the ability of the Inquiry to achieve a fair outcome will be significantly compromised.

I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate—the second on this issue, which I started to campaign on five years ago. Just under two years ago, I asked the Backbench Business Committee for a debate about a drug called Primodos, which was prescribed to pregnant women in the 1960s and 1970s. It had 40 times the strength of oral contraceptives prescribed today, and we know what they were devised for. It is estimated that at least 1.5 million women may have taken this drug, and thousands of families suffered. In answer to a written parliamentary question, the then Minister assessed that 3,540 women may have suffered effects. We think that the actual figure is much higher.

This all started in 2011, when I met my constituent Nichola at her home. She was born with life-threatening internal congenital deformities to her stomach, spine, heart and womb. She had her first operation was when she was seven days old. Since then, her life has consisted of visiting hospital, as an in-patient and an out-patient, and going through various procedures. Another of my constituents is Bridget Olive.

When I met Nichola at her home, I saw boxes and boxes of documents, some of which had been leaked by various pharmaceutical companies and other bodies. I had a brief look through some of those documents, and it was at that point that I decided that the issue needed more than mentioning, or raising; we needed a real investigation and an inquiry on what happened. I am not exaggerating or being over-emotional, but, applying my legal knowledge in my capacity as a barrister, I am prepared to say that there was deliberate criminal, negligent oversight by the then Committee on Safety of Medicines as regards this drug and its usage, and the fact that it continued to be prescribed for years, despite most of the medical community knowing that it had caused adverse consequences for the women who took it.

At the end of the first debate on this subject, the Minister agreed that there should be an expert panel inquiry on the issue. He agreed, in and outside Parliament, that the inquiry would look at all the available documents, including those that we would provide, or had come across, and those in the archives. The Minister went
[Yasmin Qureshi]

further and ordered that all the documents held by the current equivalent body, the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency, should be revealed. The inquiry was to look at all the documents and assess what had happened. I will come on to what the inquiry has produced, but this debate is more about how the inquiry has progressed. An inquiry that becomes a whitewash is pointless and a waste of time and money.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this incredibly important debate, and I reiterate and agree with what she says. When at the heart of the matter there is a regulator who took eight years to act between 1967 and 1975, and many years later is investigating what it had done, it is crucial that that inquiry is seen to be independent and full.

Yasmin Qureshi: I thank the hon. Gentleman. I shall come on to the issue of the independence of the inquiry and the members of the panel.

The Minister indicated that the inquiry would be carried out by an independent panel of experts and said that it would look at everything that had happened and the lessons to be learned. Our present concern is about what happened, who did what and who failed to do what, and what compensation and apology victims will receive.

I shall briefly highlight some of the evidence that we have uncovered, which shows what happened in the 1960s and 1970s.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): My hon. Friend will be aware that between 1970 and 1971 Finland, Sweden and Norway all banned the use of such treatments. Does she think that there was plenty of indication at that time to give people reason to believe that there was a real problem that needed to be addressed, and is it not timely—I congratulate her—that we are now starting to get the evidence out and have it discussed?

Yasmin Qureshi: My right hon. Friend is right. It is amazing how other countries reacted to the evidence. The medical association in the UK was first alerted by Dr Isabel Gal in 1967, a paediatrician who said that her research showed that there was a link between women who had taken the drug and deformities in babies. Her letters and her research were dismissed out of hand by Dr Inman, who headed the regulatory authority. In a letter the authority referred to her in a derogatory manner as a “pathetic eastern European woman”, completely ignoring what she had to say.

We know that other information was available. For example, in February 1969 a committee received a letter from a Dr Dean of the Royal College of General Practitioners, who stated that “Primodos should be withdrawn from use”.

However, the chief scientist of that committee, Dr Inman, refused to support that and instead wrote to the manufacturer of the drug, Schering, stating that “the opinion expressed by Dr Dean that Primodos should be withdrawn should not be taken into account. Some women deliberately use excessive doses of Primodos with the intention of ridding themselves of an unwanted pregnancy”.

We have heard that Norway and Sweden banned the drug in 1970.

Again the Committee on Safety of Medicines took no action. Similar notices were issued in Finland, Germany, the USA, Australia, Ireland and the Netherlands, but again the committee took no action. In fact, in 1974 a letter from Schering—from PGT Bye—stated that “after discussion with the Committee on Safety of Medicines we agreed some time ago not to recommend for the use of pregnancy diagnosis. It is not recommended for early pregnancy since the possibility of virilisation of the female foetus cannot be excluded with certainty”.

Yet still the committee issued no warning.

A further letter stated that “side effects cannot be reliably excluded” and that “Primodos should no longer be recommended for the diagnosis of pregnancy.”

Again the committee said nothing. There are countless such documents. One of our concerns is that panels should have sight of those documents and be given sufficient time to read them, because they must be looked at properly and not ignored.

In 1975 the Committee on Safety of Medicines issued its first warning, stating:

“A number of studies have shown a possible association between Hormone Pregnancy Tests and an increased incidence of congenital abnormalities.”

On 15 October 1975, 41 years ago, Dr Inman wrote:

“We are defenceless in the matter of the eight-year delay”.

In November 1977, eight years after the committee had first been alerted, an adverse reaction leaflet was issued to the medical profession, stating:

“Further results have now been published and the association is confirmed.”

I want to refer briefly to some of the documents, many of which were archived in Berlin and at Kew. Marie Lyon, who chairs the victims association, has painstakingly gathered the documents, and the panel has been informed of them. I want to pay particular tribute to Marie Lyon, who has been doing a considerable amount of work over the past five years. She has spent months and months working on the documents, travelling the length and breadth of the United Kingdom and visiting Germany. She has effectively been working alone, with no support from Government bodies or local authorities. She and the victims association have been on their own. The only support they have had has been from members of the all-party parliamentary group and the Members in the Chamber today who have been fighting their cause. I also want to thank Jason Farrell of Sky News, who has been instrumental in getting some of the documents from Berlin and having them translated.

Translation of the documents is another issue, because many of those that came from Berlin are in German, as is to be expected. I want to know whether all those documents will be translated into English for the panel, because clearly it cannot carry out the inquiry if they are in a different language. We need to know whether all the documents that the victims association has gathered will be looked at and presented to the panel and, if so, in what format? When I used to prepare a large case with thousands of pages, there was a way of presenting the evidence so that the jury could understand it. Will that be done for the inquiry? If not, why not?
We do not have the resources, but our basic research has shown that one of the panel members, Laura Yates, put on her social media that she does not think that Primodos caused any defect. How can this person be part of the panel? Then we have information about Doctor Schaefer. This man has worked with the company concerned, so he is directly linked with Schering—and he is still on the panel. That is two people, just from our basic inquiry. We want to know from the Minister whether the panel members will be properly vetted to see whether they are really independent and to find out about their connections. Again, without that, we will not have any faith in the inquiry.

We have asked the inquiry how long it will go on and how many sessions it will hold. There has been no response—nothing. We have tried to find out for well over a year, but nobody knows what on earth is going on with this inquiry. That leads to another question for the Minister. How long is the inquiry going to carry on? How many days have been set aside for it? How many hours have been spent on the inquiry to date?

In addition, how have the experts been chosen? We do not even know by what methodology they have been chosen. There are about 15 people on the panel, but does it need that many? Who are they, and how relevant is their experience to what they are looking at?

Yasmin Qureshi: I was just coming to the end of my speech, Madam Deputy Speaker. Lastly, we are very grateful that the inquiry has been set up, but we have genuine concerns about what is happening with it and where it is going. As has been said, at the end of the day, there is no point in having the inquiry if it does not look at the things that matter, one of which must be to provide an explanation of the regulatory failures and the cover-ups in the 1960s and 1970s.

3.26 pm

Yvonne Fovargue (Makerfield) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) on securing this debate. I am pleased to be called to speak, not least to pay tribute to my wonderful constituent Marie Lyon, whom my hon. Friend has mentioned. She has worked absolutely indefatigably to pursue justice for the families affected by the hormone pregnancy test drugs. In large part, it is her persistence that has led to this inquiry, on which she sits as an observer representing the Association for Children Damaged by Hormone Pregnancy Tests.

Marie Lyon is bound by confidentiality and prohibited from discussing the process, but I know from my own observation that she has been swamped by a deluge of paper, with 36 large files in the past two weeks alone. She has two weeks to read and research those more than 3,000 pages of densely written and complex information, which is often in a foreign language, as we have heard. If I were a cynic, I would suspect that those involved were trying to deter her from continuing, but it is obvious that they do not know Marie. If all the group members
have been given the same timescale. I wonder at the ability of any of them to assimilate that amount of information, however much support they have.

Marie has a daughter who was born with her left arm missing below the elbow joint. Marie took Primodos on the advice of her doctor, whose words were, “We’ve got this great new pill to find out if you’re pregnant—we’ve no longer got to kill the rabbit.” She was excited and eager to find out whether she was pregnant, and of course she took her doctor’s advice, as did a number of women in my constituency. I have the highest concentration of constituents affected by thalidomide and the highest concentration of families affected by Primodos, and there is a cluster in certain practices. To me, as a lay person, that demonstrates beyond doubt the link between the drug and the birth defects, and I question the reasonableness of placing the burden of proof on those affected. Surely the key test should be to prove that the tablets were safe to take and that there were no contraindications. We must also find out whether, when the tablets were safe to take and that there were no contraindications, the tablets were withdrawn speedily and in time to stop any further birth defects.

These women, whose stories I will mention, were all advised to take the drug by their GPs. They took it to find out whether they were pregnant, not for any other reason—shamefully, that has been suggested—and they are still living with the consequences. Wendy’s son has badly deformed feet; June’s son has congenital heart problems; and Mike has severe swallowing and eating problems. Those are all different defects, but people would have thought that they were pregnant and would have taken the pill at different times throughout the gestation period, so of course the problems will be different. All of those are personal tragedies.

The story that has remained with me the longest is that of a constituent who does not want to be named. She came to me with her husband. They had looked forward to having a large family. She said to me, “I have a lot of love to share.” She was excited about her first pregnancy, which was confirmed after she took Primodos. Her son was born with learning difficulties and feeding problems. When they asked the doctor what the reason for this was, he said it could be hereditary, passed down from her husband. In fact, he said to her husband, “It could be your fault.” They decided not to have any more children because of that risk, so this drug not only affected their child, but cheated them out of having the other children they so desperately wanted. My constituent’s husband died earlier this year, worn out by the strain of looking after the son and of thinking for years that it could be his fault.

It is for those families that justice needs to be done, and that it needs to be seen to be done. I therefore support the motion fully. Marie Lyon and the other members of the association have done sterling work in bringing about its scope and making it move forward. They have achieved great things with little money and support. It is now up to us to ensure that their voice is heard loud and clear, and that the expert working group operates without bias and undue influence. Only through lifting the veil of secrecy can we be sure of that. Only then can there be full confidence in the conclusion. We cannot give these families back what they have lost, but we can at least give them that.

3.32 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I speak on behalf of my constituent, Mrs Wilma Ord, her daughter Kirsteen and the many hundreds of thousands of women and families who have been affected by the drug Primodos. It is a sad and tragic irony that this debate follows another hugely important debate on baby loss, in a week when we remember parents and families who have lost their little ones.

Miscarriages, cerebral palsy, brain damage and children being born without limbs are just some of the alleged side effects that the hormone pregnancy drug Primodos can inflict. Dubbed the forgotten thalidomide, Primodos was a drug given to women in the 1950s, ’60s and ’70s to establish whether women were pregnant. Many believe that it caused damage and deformities in thousands of babies in the UK and across the world. Primodos, as prescribed, was 40 times stronger than the average oral contraceptive pill. Recorded tests undertaken by the producing drug company Schering, now known as Bayer, in 1966 found that Primodos was potentially “embryo lethal” and “embryotoxic”. The Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency has stated:

“The regulatory and social environments have changed greatly since the 1970s and as a result no medicines are recommended for use in pregnancy unless considered essential.”

I urge the Minister to keep those points in mind throughout this debate and while considering the role he has to play in ensuring the integrity of the inquiry that was set up last year to establish whether there is a link between Primodos and the birth defects.

Before I touch on the detail of the inquiry, I want to pay tribute to my constituent, Mrs Wilma Ord and her daughter Kirsteen, who are here in the Gallery today, along with many other families whose lives have been affected by this issue. They have made long journeys from around the country at their own expense. Wilma has visited me and my staff a number of times and I will speak more about her story later. Marie Lyon, who has been mentioned, has done a power of work and is an inspiration to me and my staff on a daily basis.

I also pay tribute to my colleague and friend, the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi). She has been fighting on this issue for many years. Sometimes we must put party politics to one side for the greater good. Today is one of those days when politicians of all colours stand together in unity to fight for justice for those who have been silenced or who cannot speak for themselves.

On the scope of the inquiry, in October 2014, the former Minister for Life Sciences, the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), ordered an independent review of all papers and evidence linking hormone pregnancy tests to birth defects, following wide-scale concerns raised over many years by many Members of the House. I have been following recent developments in the progress of that inquiry and have grave concerns about its scope and the way in which it is being conducted. In summary, I am concerned about conflicts of interest, as there is a lack of clarity on the framework, including the scope of work and the decision makers; the evidence
being presented to the group; the lack of focus on regulatory failures; and, finally and most importantly, transparency and openness.

On the conflicts of interest, my concerns are severe yet simple. Panel members have been asked to self-declare their interests. We know of one instance of an undeclared interest that went unnoticed until highlighted to the individual. That suggests that no proper checks are in place to ensure that declarations are made. There is no clarity on how or whether such conflicts of interests are declared or investigated, or on how it is decided whether they are conflicts of interest. There is a lack of clarity on who is responsible, if anyone.

It was thought appropriate to invite an expert panel member as a visiting expert who was later removed from the working group because of his previous associations with the drug manufacturer. I am concerned about the logic in deciding, first, to invite him as an expert and then to remove him because of a conflict of interests. Who is making those decisions and why are they being made?

I and other members of the all-party group on oral hormone pregnancy tests were told in a letter from the chair of the expert working group that

“no core members of the Expert Working Group have declared any interests in Bayer”.

What is a core member? How has the information given been verified? Is it acceptable for non-core members to be associated with Bayer? The letter also states that there are “participant categories”, but again there is no explanation available of what that means or who decided those categories. It further states that all recommendations about who ought to sit on the working group

“were considered and where appropriate, endorsed by the Chair, taking into consideration the expertise required for the Expert Working Group and following consultation with the MHRA Executive”.

What expertise does the chair consider is required? Is it up to only the chair to decide or is it decided in conjunction with the MHRA? Are they the correct people to decide, particularly in the light of what I have just said about decision making?

I know from a particularly odd experience of my own concerning a panel member — the hon. Member for Bolton South East also mentioned this situation; we are unsure whether the person in question is a core member — that there is a potential conflict of interest. Earlier this year when we convened with Marie Lyon we came across a website for something named “bumps/UKTIS” — that stands for UK Teratology Information Service. It purports to be funded by Public Health England. It was with some concern that we read an article on that site on the apparent safety of Primodos. By way of example, I quote just one section, which states:

“Although older smaller studies suggested a possible association between oral hormonal pregnancy tests and congenital malformation, subsequent larger prospective controlled studies showed no increased risk.”

That is doublespeak at its worst.

Upon noticing the article, I telephoned the number on the website to ask about its content and share my concerns. The gentleman with whom I spoke assured me that the head of UKTIS, who wrote the article and whom he named during the call, had lots of knowledge on the subject on account of her sitting on the expert working group. The content of the article has also been tweeted on numerous occasions. Members may imagine my dismay not only upon reading the article, which suggests to the public that the drugs are safe—as we all know, that at best remains uncertain—but upon then learning that a member of the working group was behind its content.

The review’s scope is to “examine the evidence to assess whether there are grounds for accepting a link between the use of HPTs and the conditions experienced by some patients.”

Given that, will the Minister consider how independent and impartial the expert working group truly is or can be? Is the situation I have outlined not in fact a clear conflict of interests? Is that particular member of the working group a “core member”, expected to make a decision on whether there is a link between hormone pregnancy tests and birth defects in babies? I would suggest from her tweets that her decision is already clear. That would appear to undermine the whole purpose of the formation of the working group.

Given the obvious conflict of interest, I wrote to the chair of the inquiry panel, who I thought had a duty to check on such conflicts, for confirmation that that group member had declared an interest. I also asked what measures were taken to decide that no conflict existed. I suggested that, if it was not declared by the panel member, it should be investigated, and asked whether it was investigated. Given that one member had already been asked to leave the panel following an unveiled conflict, I looked for assurance that checks and balance were in place. I wrote and sent my letter at the end of August and am yet to receive a response.

Given the gravity of my concerns, combined with other alarming evidence that all hon. Members have seen, I get a sense not only that something is amiss with the inquiry, but that it smacks of a continued cover-up on a significant scale. I do not use those words lightly.

My final question on conflicts is this: how can we have confidence in the membership of the working group, and have the members been carefully considered to ensure an appropriate balance and expertise while maintaining impartiality?

The letter from the chair that sought to reassure the all-party parliamentary group members about the documentation being considered by the group raised more questions than it answered. We were told that “members, invited experts and observers were recently given access to all of the documents the MHRA had so far used in preparing the assessments... These are the documents that have been used as a basis for the MHRA papers for the first four meetings including 11th August meeting.”

In case anyone missed that, I will say it again: the documents given to the expert working group panel have been used by the MHRA to prepare assessments. What exactly does that mean? It strikes of the MHRA cherry-picking what the panel members get to see. Frankly, that is not acceptable. How can it make decisions based on MHRA-chosen information when there is a vast amount of information available on Primodos? How does that fit with the order from the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk for a review of all of the evidence and papers?

I fully appreciate that I have delved into significant detail, which we occasionally lack in the House, but I hope the significance of it is not lost on the Minister
when he considers the numerous documents found in the Germany and Kew archives, some of which I have seen and will describe later. Furthermore, articles published in Der Spiegel in July released damning information about Bayer and Primodos and Duogynon, as it is known in Germany. The article is exceptionally detailed and includes the many failings of Bayer and the deliberate suppression of evidence. I will of course be more than happy to share the documents with the Minister.

My concern with the lack of focus of the inquiry into regulatory failures relates to my concern about the evidence provided to the working group. By way of example, let me share the experience of my constituent Mrs Wilma Ord and her daughter Kirsteen. Mrs Ord came to see me when I was first elected. She had been pregnant in 1970 and gave birth to her daughter Kirsteen, who was born with multiple defects, including cerebral palsy, profound deafness, asthma and bone density issues. Mrs Ord had taken Primodos to test whether she was pregnant. Her medical records, which she brought to my office, show a gap between 27 November 1968 and 27 January 1971. In other words, there is no evidence of her ever being pregnant or being prescribed Primodos by her GP.

Having tried desperately to track down her missing medical records, my constituent received a letter from NHS Scotland, which states:

“I refer to missing notes for the period 1969 to 1970...I have done a full investigation and contacted all the previous GP practices you gave me and also checked our offsite storage...but with no success. Unfortunately we have no way of knowing when or where these notes were lost or mislaid at a practice”.

Evidence I have seen—I do not know whether it has been provided to the expert working group members—shows that Schering knew of GP concerns from the 1960s about the adverse effect of Primodos experienced by their patients. I have also seen documents showing that Schering sought legal advice, and that it was told that it would be more than likely to be found guilty of negligence by a trial judge.

I have seen a document saying that Schering should try to “buy off” a family who were attempting to take legal action against it because there was no telling how many more cases there would be. I have seen a document with my own eyes dated 13 March 1964 clearly stating that, for GP doctors worried about adverse reactions, it would be best for them to destroy any evidence or records to protect themselves “however wrong that was”. I ask the Minister to think again about where these notes were lost or mislaid at a practice.

“Schering was warned in the late sixties by various animal tests. They had knowledge of possible side effects of this hormone drug.”

Tests were conducted with different dosages, with the result that some dosages resulted in disabilities and the death of foetuses. Other tests showed that animals showed weight loss. In 1971, a scientist recorded that a test dose was

“highly embryotoxic and a cause of early cell death.”

Earlier this year, a major radio station in Germany broadcast a 45-minute documentary on Primodos. Here are just some brief extracts of the stories told:

“My name is Petra Marek and my mother has taken Duogynon as a pregnancy test, but was unaware of what consequences this would have”——

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. I remind the hon. Lady that she is a Front-Bench spokesperson and this is a Back-Bench debate. I am already going to have to impose an informal time limit of 10 minutes per speaker. If she could start to get to the end of her speech, we would all be very grateful.

Hannah Bardell: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will wind up my comments as quickly as I can.

Another said:

“My name is Birgit Rothlaender. I am almost 50 years old. I have a deformation of my genitals and I have a colostomy for the last 43 years. I think enough is enough, I would like to get 100% confirmation on what happened.”

Let me be clear that for the families who have suffered for decades, this is not about money. It is absolutely about unveiling the truth. The Scottish Government
have raised and continue to raise the issue of the independent panel with the UK Government and the MHRA. Public money is being used for this inquiry and it would be an absolute dereliction of duty if it was misused. We must ensure that we do right by the victims of Primodos. We must have an effective inquiry and get the answers for the families which they so desperately need.

3.49 pm  
Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I, too, thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) for securing today’s debate. It is a privilege to follow the fine speeches from my hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) and the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell).

I rise today at the request of my constituent Susan, who is from Stalybridge. It was in the early ’70s that Susan suspected and hoped that she was pregnant. With no home urine stream pregnancy testing yet available, Susan did what any woman of her generation would do—and will do for years to come—and visited her local GP. Yet that simple visit, that routine appointment, was to haunt her with the need for answers for the rest of her life. As with 1.5 million others of her generation, several of whose stories we have learnt about today, Susan’s GP prescribed her with a couple of pills, to be taken a day apart, to determine whether she was indeed pregnant. If she was not, she would bleed, and if she was, she would not.

The pills were handed over without lengthy explanation, detailed precautions or any warning. These pills Susan now knows to be Primodos. The Primodos she took contained a now unfathomably strong cocktail of hormones: 10 mg of norethisterone and 0.2 mg of ethinyl estradiol—I ask the House to forgive my poor pronunciation. Those hormones, in those doses, equate to 13 morning-after pills or 157 contraceptive pills. Yet many patients, like Susan, at that most optimistic moment in their lives, had no inkling of what the pills contained. They simply trusted their doctor.

In 1972, Susan’s beautiful baby daughter Sarah was born. As time would tell, Sarah had severe learning difficulties. Now 44, Sarah will never enjoy her life independently. She relies on others for her care. She will never work, marry or have her own children. Her family face the challenges that all families with a loved one with additional needs face—the limitations, obstacles and “what ifs”.

In 1978, six years after Sarah was born, Primodos was withdrawn from the medical market amid fears it prompted instant miscarriage. For many women, its stated purpose of indicating whether they were pregnant or not may, sadly, have been more like “pregnant or not any more”. For those women fortunate enough to carry their babies to term, thousands may never know whether the wide-ranging disabilities their children share, from brain damage to heart defects and sensory impairments to undeveloped limbs, may have been caused or worsened by hormone pregnancy testing, or those allegedly harmless little pills—pills whose use many doctors and researchers queried at the time; pills that were to be decisively discontinued.

I do not rise today to suggest that every single disability or birth defect originating from the period of its use was caused by Primodos. That would of course be speculative. I do not rise today to say that any specific reparations from Bayer, the manufacturer, should be made or to ask the Government, the NHS or the pharmaceutical industry to take speculation as fact. I rise to say that we need to give women such as Susan the opportunity to examine whether that speculation is indeed fact—whether suspicion could give way to transparency and whether peace of mind is a price worthy of investigation. I believe it is time for a thorough public inquiry into the safety of Primodos, its passage on to GPs’ shelves and its effects on both the babies who survived and those that did not.

I fully accept that it may not be possible to identify all the answers, but it is none the less time to ask the right questions.

I myself am the father of four beautiful children. My eldest son has significant learning difficulties, including pronounced autism. He is absolutely wonderful and I love him and always will, yet I cannot pretend that, through the initial years of his diagnosis and in the many challenging situations that have followed, any parent would not be in a position of asking themselves “Why? Why my child? What has caused his condition? It is something that we did?” Listening to this debate, I am glad that my son is a millennial baby and not a child of the ’60s or ’70s, because if there were the slightest hint that his life chances might have been robbed by something wholly preventable and unnecessary, I confess that I would find that very difficult indeed to deal with.

Yet the importance of a rigorous investigation into this drug goes beyond the need to examine the past. We must call for this investigation because failure to do so may jeopardise something so important and fundamental to our treasured NHS, and that is the implicit trust that our doctors know what is best for us. If we allow potentially harmful drugs to ease in and out of widespread use without robust examination, that will chip away at the assurance that trained professionals are sure that they know what is best for us.

Another of my constituents was the notorious, late Dr Harold Shipman. I have close friends who had a parent among his victims. Indeed, almost everyone in the town of Hyde knows someone affected by the crimes of Harold Shipman. I have therefore experienced the most extreme example of how abuse of the fundamental trust between doctor and patient can rock a community to its core. Our NHS doctors are among the best in the world and each of us owes the whole UK medical profession our gratitude for the tireless public service they give. A GP is more than a stranger in a room; they are a friend, a confidante, an advocate and a signpost to further help.

I am sure no GP wants to find themselves in the awful position of wondering whether they have dispensed prescriptions without being fully aware of the risks to the patients who took the medication. Let us not undermine this most important of relationships by failing to look closely enough at the drugs that we have asked doctors in the past to distribute. Let us put Primodos under the microscope—for Susan, for Sarah and for continued trust in our NHS.

3.55 pm  
Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) on her work in this area and on securing today’s debate. I am here to speak on
behalf of my constituents: Pamela Mawdsley from Garston and her daughter Louise; a constituent who lost a baby son; and Sonia Fitzpatrick from Halewood. All of them believe—I think correctly—that the disabilities with which they or their children live and the losses they have had to face were caused by Primodos being administered in pregnancy. This was not for any therapeutic reason, but simply as a test to determine whether or not there was a pregnancy.

Pamela’s daughter, Louise, is now 42. In 1973, Pamela visited her doctor to find out whether she was pregnant, and she was given Primodos. Her daughter was born in November that year with many severe disabilities. She has extensive brain damage, cerebral palsy, a right leg two inches shorter than the left and a right foot four sizes smaller than her left foot, spina bifida, scoliosis, partial deafness and significant special needs. She nevertheless lives a good life with her family at the age of 42, and her family obviously value her tremendously, but she has ongoing medical problems. My constituent Pamela had her medical records go missing when she became one of the people who tried, with other families, to sue in the early 1980s. The hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) also raised that issue in respect of her constituent.

Sonia Fitzpatrick from Halewood is also 42, and in common with Louise Mawdsley, she believes—again, I think, correctly—that the disabilities with which she was born that affect her every day were caused by the Primodos given to her mother to see whether or not she was pregnant. She has spina bifida and other significant medical problems. Since being a young child, she has had a colostomy and a urostomy. She has significant ongoing difficulties with her feet, her hands and other joints. She, too, has lived for 42 years with the effects of Primodos given to her mother to see whether or not she was pregnant. She has spina bifida and other significant medical problems. Since being a young child, she has had a colostomy and a urostomy. She has significant ongoing difficulties with her feet, her hands and other joints. She, too, has lived for 42 years with the effects of that day when her mother went to find out whether she was pregnant.

I first met Pamela Mawdsley in 2011, and I had never heard of Primodos at that time. As a former lawyer who used to conduct product liability litigation and medical negligence cases, however, I rather wondered why I had not. I practised from 1990 to 1996, specialising in this field among others. Products that cause harm, especially medical products, were one of my focuses at that time; and seeking the truth and, where appropriate, compensation for those adversely affected was what I sought to achieve. Yet I had still never heard of Primodos, which is why I am participating in today’s debate.

The stories my constituents and others tell me are familiar to anyone who has practised as a lawyer in product liability litigation. From Thalidomide to Primodos and vaccine damage, there are some common themes: a lack of warnings about possible side-effects; being called a fussy mother when disabilities of a young baby are first noticed and raised with medical practitioners; denial of causality when there are reports of adverse effects; the sudden and inexplicable loss of medical records that indicated what was prescribed and when—often “just for the week” or “just for the month”. I have come across that many times in litigation. Then there are overt hostility and lack of transparency when doubts are finally expressed; no acceptance of liability by drug company or regulatory agency or prescriber, even after the withdrawal of the product in question; and a legal battle—it also happened in this case—usually with gross inequality of arms, when those at fault are utterly unwilling to concede any kind of liability or causation or to co-operate at all in finding some way through the difficulties that the victims have to suffer for many years.

The results are always the same. There are years of denial and agony for those affected, and a subsequent failure to help to alleviate the consequences or to understand the motives of the people who come forward. There is agony for parents, who invariably blame themselves for what has happened to their children, particularly in cases such as these in which there is no therapeutic reason for taking the drug. There are also extremely long, frustrating and often fruitless campaigns for truth and justice, many of which involve failed litigation, as in this case. The litigation usually fails on the basis of causation, or, effectively, because there is no real co-operation or willingness to discover the truth but merely a defensive attitude on the part of medical authorities, scientists, and frequently—I hesitate to say it—Governments. That is what I see going on here.

I think there is little doubt that hormonal pregnancy tests caused the birth defects about which many of the families affected have complained. There was significant disquiet, and evidence from the 1960s, that there were adverse effects that led to the kind of disabilities that Louise and Sonia now live with, but there were no warnings. Obviously proving causation in individual cases is difficult, particularly when the medical records have gone missing, but why should these families have to prove it? Drugs containing such hormones in such doses were banned elsewhere. The fact that existing drugs contain them in much smaller doses does not mean that the large-dose versions could not cause the problems that we are discussing now.

Survivors such as Louise and Sonia have significant and ongoing serious health problems, and they and their families deserve the truth about what happened, in addition to the further help that they need. We have the so-called independent review that the Government established in October 2014, and I think that they were right to establish it, but it does not seem to be going well. I am not sure that it has the confidence of the families, or the confidence of those who have been fighting for so long to get to the bottom of what happened. There seems to be a failure to work with the families who are affected by this scandal.

I have seen independent reviews that work. The Hillsborough independent panel springs to mind: I had a long association with that campaign, and I know what works and what does not. Independent reviews that work are not based on expecting campaigners to sign confidentiality agreements before they can even observe proceedings. They are not based on appointing experts who are suspected by some families—rightly or wrongly—to have a conflict of interests. They are not based on proceedings being so slow and opaque, with so little information emerging, that those affected become suspicious, or do not know what is going on behind the closed doors of the review. They are based on proper consultation and obtaining the full confidence of those affected.

If that does not happen, the end result, whatever it is, will make matters worse. It will make the affected families feel that there has been another establishment
have a doughty champion. She and my hon. Friends lack of will to put it to the test. In her, those families by this sorry tale of incompetence and deficiency and a in pursuing the matter on behalf of the families affected is—a scandal, pure and simple. She has been tenacious in the democratic process, to scrutiny and to accountability? Are our institutions so arrogant that they feel immune an examination? How has it come to this? Have we oth institutions and organisations kicking into the light of in this country over the years, do we really have to drag it roars "No cover-up!"

After all the miscarriages of justice that have occurred in this country over the years, do we really have to drag institutions and organisations kicking into the light of an examination? How has it come to this? Have we learned no lessons from the history of all those inquiries? Are our institutions so arrogant that they feel immune to the democratic process, to scrutiny and to accountability? What has it come to when this House has to consider such a motion from my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi)? We should not have to be here doing this today.

My hon. Friend has done a remarkable job on behalf of the people affected by this scandal. That is what it is—a scandal, pure and simple. She has been tenacious in pursuing the matter on behalf of the families affected by this sorry tale of incompetence and deficiency and a lack of will to put it to the test. In her, those families have a doughty champion. She and my hon. Friends, the Members for Garston and Halewood, for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) and for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds), and the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell), have today laid out the inadequacies of the process so far. I do not want to repeat what they have said. They could not have been any clearer; any more forensic or any more passionate. However, I will make just two brief points.

First, I want to express my continued support for my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East and for the families affected, some of whom are my constituents. I am grateful for the work that she has done on their behalf so far. There is no time for subtlety in this regard, so secondly, I want to say that if the people in the institutions who have been given the task of getting to the bottom of this issue, paid for by the taxpayer—and, yes, by the families who are here today—are not prepared to carry out that task to the full satisfaction of the thousands of people affected, namely the victims, they should move aside and let others, who want to expose the inadequacies of a system that has left those people adrift for decades, get on with the job.

Enough is enough. I hope and trust that the Minister will hear the just and reasonable pleas of our constituents, and that he will take this motion and away and put it into effect, to the letter and in spirit. This injustice has gone on for 40 years, and it is time to draw a line under it. It is time to give closure and peace to the victims and their families. Anything less would be a betrayal of our duty and of our constituents.
wanted a clear statement that pregnant women should not use these products. Clearly, there had been sufficient adverse reactions reported for the committee to reach those conclusions.

I can remember how jubilant we were last year when the inquiry was finally agreed to. We thought that, finally, the evidence and the causal relationships would be examined. We even thought that we might get an explanation of why the medical notes had mysteriously gone missing. We felt that we had achieved something and that we would get answers to the questions that had tormented affected families for decades.

The Government had promised in good faith that the inquiry would be transparent and in good time, but, disappointingly, the inquiry has delivered on neither transparency nor timeliness so far. Questions need to be answered. Why did it take more than a year to set up the expert working group? Why has the working group met only three times? We have no idea at what stage the inquiry is now. The Government must now provide reassurances and clarity.

The expert working group has to be more accountable and more open to scrutiny. It has to engage and work with the Association of Children Damaged by Hormone Pregnancy Tests to address its concerns on the current progress, or lack of it, of the inquiry process. A key concern, which has been voiced by many Members, is that the expert working group has also signed a confidentiality clause. It is felt that this compromises the possibility of a fair and just outcome.

The former Minister for Life Sciences, the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) set out quite clearly the possibility of a fair and just outcome.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to speak in this debate on this devastatingly sad topic. I also thank the Backbench Business Committee and my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) for securing the debate today. It is an honour to follow some passionate speeches today. I pay tribute to Marie Lyon and the hormone pregnancy test campaign for their powerful representations in telling their own stories and the story of Marie’s daughter in the media.

Much that we take for granted today, given the improvements in health care and the ease of pregnancy tests, sheds an important light on what happened 40 years ago. It is a matter of great sadness and shame that it happened in our country. Many of the tributes and stories that we have heard today show that many are still living with the consequences and that we must learn the lessons. This inquiry and our confidence in its findings is critical not only to close this chapter of our history but to ensure that lessons are learned and clear findings will be adhered to in the future when it comes to regulation and the description of how medications should be used.

When I first came to hear of this issue, I found it hard to comprehend why it seems to have taken so long for those who were prescribed Primodos to get clarity and answers about what happened to them, for the issue to be comprehensively researched, for an explanation to be given about why the drug continued to be used after concerns were raised and for families affected to be given an apology and justice. Studies in the UK and elsewhere from the late 1960s into the early 1970s suggested a link between the use of hormone pregnancy tests and a range of abnormalities including cleft lip, limb reduction and heart abnormalities.

Bethan Dickson from my constituency was affected after her mother took the drug. I want to thank her for having the courage to come and meet me about this issue and for giving me permission to share her story with the House. She says:

“My name is Bethan Dickson. I am 48 years old and work as an occupational therapist in West London. But I was born in 1968 in South Wales with heart and limb defects that have impacted on my entire life. My mother was given Primodos, an oral pregnancy test, by her doctor and I believe that this is the cause of these physical defects.

Along with members of the Association for Children Damaged by Hormone Pregnancy Tests I am supporting an inquiry into how this damaging drug could have been prescribed to mothers when there were already concerns raised about its safety.

I feel it is important that accountability is accepted by the drug company who put profit before patient safety, and for the government to acknowledge its responsibility for not ensuring that the citizens of this country were protected from harm.

I was born with a heart murmur and poorly formed bones in my feet. I experienced some shortness of breath as a child, slept poorly as a baby and was restricted in sporting activities. The heart murmur did not require a surgical intervention, but I had frequent and regular visits to cardiologists.

I suspect that many Association members can relate to waiting to see the doctor in hospital in the 1970s and ’80s and knowing where you are in the queue because you can see the thickest medical record in the stack and knowing that it’s yours. Thankfully, the introduction of electronic medical records means I don’t suffer that particular humiliation any more.

The defects in the bones of my toes became more obvious as I grew, and from my earliest memories (about six years old) I remember pain in both feet that prevented me from participating any more. I was fortunate to have been able to live a full life, going to university, working full time and making a contribution to society in my capacity as an occupational therapist. Every day at work I meet people with disability or cognitive impairments, and lucky enough to have had loving parents and a husband to give me the strength and support to deal with the emotional strain of dealing with the ongoing difficulties.

I have been able to live a full life, going to university, working full time and making a contribution to society in my capacity as an occupational therapist. Every day at work I meet people with disability or cognitive impairments, and nothing prepared me for my first meeting with other Association members in June 2014.

The severity of impairments in some of my contemporaries both shocked and angered me. Some have profound disabilities that have prevented them from living a full life, and left them dependent on carers and family for care and support. This could
have been avoided with responsible oversight of the drugs being given to expectant mothers, and more robust testing of drugs before they were brought to market across the world.

When I met other Association members I felt guilty that their suffering was so much worse than mine, and then felt guilty that I was relieved at that. My mother along with the mothers of many members feels guilty that she took a tablet that caused these lifelong problems to her child.

Of course logically I understand that the guilt does not lie with me or my mother, but in the absence of any form of apology or recognition of wrongdoing by the drug company or the government we do not have closure or the confidence this won’t happen again.”

Hannah Bardell: The hon. Lady makes the absolutely crucial point that, until the families have answers, they cannot deal with the trauma and they cannot get the proper counselling and support that they deserve.

Seema Malhotra: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. That is certainly the reason why Bethan Dickson has written to me. She said:

“That’s why I support an inquiry to establish the facts and explain to the country how this could have happened just a short while after the Thalidomide scandal.”

Bethan’s story highlights the impact of this drug and how it was prescribed and the effects that it still has to this day. I have been struck as well by the work of Marie Fensome and her campaign, their patience and their systematic and honest work. They have desired to work in partnership simply to find answers, for justice and to ensure everything is done so that this does not happen again, but I am concerned that they are not being met halfway by an inquiry that does not appear to have had effective governance while there are concerns about the constitution of the panel, the robustness of its procedures and the approach to the evidence collected and how it is analysed.

I want to close my contribution today with some questions to the Minister and some commitments that I would like to hear being made today. I believe that it is time to make sure that there is commitment today to respond to the issues raised and to do so formally in writing to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East; to reconfirm the status of the inquiry, its terms of reference and its timetable for delivery; to say how quality will be ensured; to explain what action is being taken to address the concerns that have been raised by hon. Members today; and to state on the public record that Ministers will see through their commitment on this inquiry to a report and findings that will command the confidence of the House and, indeed, the families and victims who have waited so long for those answers and for justice.

4.24 pm

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) for securing this debate, and for championing in Parliament the concerns of families who have been affected by hormone pregnancy tests. I also pay tribute to all those families who have for years been involved in the Association for Children Damaged by Hormone Pregnancy Tests.

One such family lives in my constituency. Stephen Fensome is a constituent of mine. His mother went to the GP early on in her pregnancy to see if she was pregnant, as any woman would. She was given Primodos. Like any of us, she trusted her doctor, and her doctor, in turn, trusted the advice he had been given. It was only months later when Stephen was born, in 1967, that his parents discovered that he was severely brain-damaged, would suffer a severe form of epilepsy all his life, which would get worse with age, and that he would suffer from daily seizures, often in the middle of the night.

I have met Stephen. He came to my surgery with his parents. He requires 24-hour care. His parents, now in their mid and late 70s, have cared for him all his life, and they love him, just as they love their two healthy daughters, but they struggle to find respite because of the severity of his seizures. It was years before the family discovered that the medication that Pat had been given was equivalent to taking 40 contraceptive pills in one dosage. One does not have to be a medical professional for that to ring alarm bells.

It also became apparent that, as early as the 1960s, and into the 1970s, research carried out warned of the toxic and, in some cases, lethal impact of the drug. Indeed, in 1975, GPs were sent advice not to prescribe it any more, but it was several more years before the drug was withdrawn from the market. Research suggests that it is likely that many women who took the medication suffered miscarriage or stillbirth. Babies who survived this toxic medication were severely affected by abnormalities or disabilities.

I was pleased to learn, as was the Fensome family, that the Minister’s predecessor, the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), agreed to the establishment of an inquiry. However, as the Minister has heard from all the speakers in this debate, the families have serious, deep and genuine concerns, and I understand that they do not have confidence in this inquiry.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): I would like to put on record my thanks to Stephen’s family, including Charlotte, who lives in West End in my constituency. She came to see me to thank the all-party parliamentary group on oral hormone pregnancy tests for its work on the issue, and to explain how her care for Stephen carries on, as her parents age.

Emma Reynolds: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. Charlotte has been a tireless campaigner for the truth of what happened in the 1960s and 1970s.

I hope that when the Minister winds up, he will answer a number of questions about the inquiry. As my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) said, we want him to get a grip on the inquiry. Will he guarantee that all the relevant evidence will be put before the inquiry? As the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) suggested, there is great concern that evidence is being cherry-picked. Will he guarantee that the inquiry is independent, full and transparent, and will he give a commitment today, to the House and the families present, that he will do everything in his power to ensure that the inquiry gets to the bottom of what happened, including: why evidence in the 1960s of the harmful—indeed devastating—impact of the drug was ignored for so long; why it continued to be prescribed; why there seemed to be a medical cover-up; why it took so long to be banned; and what was behind the continuous regulatory failure?

The family whom I represent would, although they might not admit it, of course like more help caring for Stephen, as any family would, but they are not driven by a desire for compensation. They are driven by a long
and anguished search for truth and justice. They do not want a whitewash. They want to have confidence in the inquiry, but regrettably they do not have it. I urge the Minister to ensure that they get the truth, and justice. Surely they deserve nothing less.

4.30 pm

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Along with other Members, I want to pay great tribute to the hon. Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi), who has run a terrific campaign on this issue, worked tirelessly, set up the APPG and raised an issue that ought to be of the greatest concern to all Members because it goes, in a way, to the heart of how Governments behave. I want to focus on the inquiry and the need to establish faith with the families who have been involved with what has happened in relation to Primodos.

It seems to me that there is a strong prima facie case that something was wrong with this drug, that it was known to the authorities and that they failed to act on it for an extended period. The first warning about it was on 11 July 1967 and the adverse reaction committee felt that there were grounds for further investigation, yet it was eight years later in 1975 when it was said that Primodos was not to be prescribed for women who were pregnant. That seems to me so irresponsible, when the risks of prescribing drugs to pregnant women are so particularly high.

Governments are amazingly good at apologising for things that happened so long ago that there is nothing that can be done about them. I seem to remember that one Government apologised for the Irish potato famine 150 years after it had happened. That does no good to anybody. What Governments need to do is to put things right when people are still alive and affected by the failings that took place. But when they have not acted, when time has gone by, the onus of proof shifts to them.

It is for Governments at that point to show how well they are behaving and how properly they are going through the process. It is for them to rebuild the trust with the families, not for the families to accept guarantees from the Government without any depth to them. Therefore, with the appointments to this inquiry, the information that is being made available to it and the investigations that are taking place, the Government have a long way to go to re-establish a trust that was probably lost as long ago as 1975. It is in that context that I hope the Minister will respond to make it clear that the Government clearly need to be addressed. We welcome the fact that the former Minister for Life Sciences has sought to set up an independent inquiry into the issues. Unfortunately, as we have heard, there appears to be a divergence between the type of process that the Minister sought to establish and the way it is currently operating. I will address that point later in my remarks.

As we have heard, hundreds, if not thousands, of families have been affected by this issue and have suffered not only debilitating physical conditions but, in some cases, sadly, premature death. Alongside that, they have experienced a sense of injustice and the pain of more than 40 years of questions being left unanswered. My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East, which led to the expert working panel group being set up.

There are serious concerns about the process that clearly need to be addressed. We welcome the fact that the former Minister for Life Sciences has sought to set up an independent inquiry into the issues. Unfortunately, as we have heard, there appears to be a divergence between the type of process that the Minister sought to establish and the way it is currently operating. I will address that point later in my remarks.

Once again, I congratulate the hon. Lady on what she has done. I do not want to go into specific cases because I think those will be judged by the inquiry and that it will be a proper process to investigate whether the evidence is there on a widespread scale, but with such a strong base case, as we already know, we must have an inquiry that people can trust.

4.34 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) and the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) on securing this debate, and I welcome the well-informed and passionate nature of the contributions that we have heard from across the House. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to Marie Lyon, chair of the Association for Children Damaged by Hormone Pregnancy Tests, who has never given up in her fight to ensure that parents like her get to the bottom of exactly what happened to their children and why.

I also pay tribute to the all-party parliamentary group on oral hormone pregnancy tests, ably chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East, which has offered the campaigners a huge amount of support. It was its campaigning, alongside the Association for Children Damaged by Hormone Pregnancy Tests, that led to the expert working panel group being set up.

As we have heard, hundreds, if not thousands, of families have been affected by this issue and have suffered not only debilitating physical conditions but, in some cases, sadly, premature death. Alongside that, they have experienced a sense of injustice and the pain of more than 40 years of questions being left unanswered. My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South East, in setting out the history so well, made the crucial point that the victims should be at the heart of the process. The testimony she gave on their behalf clearly showed that that is not currently the case.

My hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Yvonne Fovargue) spoke about her constituent Marie Lyon, who is on the panel, and gave the specific example of her being required to read 36 files in two weeks, which she cannot talk to anyone about. That is a patently absurd way to go about this business, and a stark example of what is going wrong.

The hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) spoke forcefully about her legitimate concerns about the impartiality of the working group and, disappointingly, a lack of any substantive response when those concerns were raised.

We also heard from my hon. Friend the Members for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds), for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle)—she made a particularly powerful speech—for Bootle (Peter Dowd), for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes), for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) and for Wolverhampton North East (Emma Reynolds), and from the hon. Member...
for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), Time prevents me from going into much detail, but all those Members spoke passionately on behalf of their constituents and clearly identified the issues that we need to address in the current process.

As we now know, from the late 1960s warnings began to emerge about adverse reactions to the drug Primodos, including birth defects and miscarriage. A wide range of studies prompting warnings continued, and by the early 1970s it was declared that Primodos should not be used as a pregnancy test. However, despite this and a warning issued in 1975 by the Committee on Safety of Medicines about an association between hormone pregnancy tests and an increased incidence of congenital abnormalities, Primodos continued to be provided to women until its withdrawal from the market by Schering in 1978. In 1977 there were still, unbelievably, 7,038 prescriptions of Primodos to pregnant women.

That really is the crux of the issue: the delay between warnings emerging and any action being taken to stop the drug being offered to women. As we have heard today, steps were taken in Sweden, Finland, Germany, the USA, Australia and Ireland up to five years before any warnings were issued in the UK. It was that delay that led to thousands more women taking the drug than would have done so had it been withdrawn from the market when the warnings became clear in 1970. It is a scandal that families are still waiting for answers about why that was allowed to happen. There is a duty on all of us to ensure that is put right.

When the issue was last debated, in October 2014, the families were very pleased when the previous Minister for Life Sciences agreed to set up what he termed “an independent panel of inquiry” and committed to “the release of all information that is held by the Department”. He also promised that the committee would be comprised of “independent members” and that he would ensure that “the association is properly represented and has a chance to give evidence.”

Finally, he stated that he wanted to “shed light on the issue and bring the all-important closure in an era of transparency, so that lessons can be learned and this never happens again.”—[Official Report, 23 October 2014; Vol. 586, c. 1139-1143.]

As I said earlier, the Opposition welcomed the establishment of that process and the assurances offered by the Minister at the time. However, as we have heard today, there is now a gaping chasm between those assurances and the current process. I therefore hope that following this debate the Minister will take some urgent steps to ensure that the families, who have already been through so much, can regain confidence in the process.

With regard to independence, we have already heard that the selection process for members of the panel can at best be described as opaque. Serious concerns have been raised about conflicts of interest, and they need to be answered. Can the Minister tell us whether he is absolutely satisfied with the transparency arrangements for the selection process and with the independence of the panel? With regard to the promise to release all information, it is vital that the panel, in addition to being provided with absolutely every piece of relevant evidence, is afforded sufficient time to consider it. The evidence must also be presented in an accessible format, as is good practice in a process of this nature. Is the Minister satisfied with the way the information is being presented to members of the panel, and can he now confirm that every piece of information held by the Department has in fact been released?

In terms of the association being properly represented, we have heard that just one member of the association is entitled to attend meetings as an observer and that they have been required to sign a confidentiality clause. I understand that the clause applies both during and after the inquiry, and not only to the panel’s discussions but to the documents that are presented. How can that person raise concerns about the process if they are prevented from talking about it? Can the Minister explain why such a high level of secrecy is being applied to a process, the primary purpose of which was originally to “bring the all-important closure in an era of transparency”?—[Official Report, 23 October 2014; Vol. 586, c. 1143.]

Justice must not only be done but be seen to be done, and there is a danger that this inquiry is failing properly to serve the people it was set up for. Given the public interest and the cost of this process, the Minister simply must address these issues now if the inquiry is to bring closure and the correct lessons are to be learned. Can he see how some of these issues will look if the families and victims of this scandal do not get the correct answers? Does he not agree that we owe them a process that is fair and transparent and, most importantly, that has their trust and confidence? Victims and their families have fought for 40 years to get answers, and during that time they have experienced grief, anger, a sense of injustice and, sadly, in some cases, even guilt, but despite all that their determination has never waned.

I am incredibly proud that, after 30 years, justice was finally served for three of my constituents and 93 other people who were tragically killed when they attended a football match at Hillsborough. That justice was achieved only because the families refused to give up, and, as the Minister will no doubt be aware, the families of the children harmed and killed by hormone pregnancy tests will not give up either. Why should the injustice that those people have suffered be compounded by further injustice and the sham of an inquiry that is patently not fit for purpose? Transparency, impartiality and completeness are not unreasonable demands; they are the basic ingredients for justice to be done. So, I ask the Minister, please to listen to the words he has heard today and act on them.

4.42 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): May I just say at the outset that nobody in the Government has any interest other than in getting to the truth in this matter? We are as keen as the people who have spoken today, and indeed the families that are watching us, to make sure that we do that, and there is a process that is to be followed to make that happen. We have heard some strong words today; “establishment whitewash”, “sham inquiry” and “a blanket over the issues”. I say again: nobody on the Government side of the House has any interest in anything other than getting to the truth, and the process that was put in place two years ago had that at its heart.

Let me join others in congratulating the hon. Members for Bolton South East (Yasmin Qureshi) and for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) on leading the charge on this, not just...
[David Mowat]

today, but in terms of the APPG and making sure that this issue is very high on the Government’s agenda. It is massively important that those who feel their lives have been adversely affected by drugs, albeit 40 or 50 years ago, see that processes are in place to make sure that we do what we can.

I would also like to pay tribute from the Government side to the Association for Children Damaged by Hormone Pregnancy Tests, and particularly to Marie Lyon for the work that she has done and continues to do—and should continue to do until we get to the truth of this matter.

I am going to talk in some detail about the progress on the inquiry, but it was very clear, as I listened to the debate, that, at the very least, the association does not have confidence in the work of the inquiry, and that is unsatisfactory. I have heard people talking about letters being unanswered and all that goes with that, and that is unacceptable. I make a commitment at the start to the association, or the APPG, that one of the things that should come right out of what we are talking about today is a letter from them, in as much detail as they want it to be, raising as many concerns as they feel they have about the details of the inquiry—a lot of detailed points have been made, which I will not be able to answer today. That letter will be answered in detail, and after that we should have a meeting to make sure that everyone is content with the direction in which we are going.

Mr George Howarth: I am grateful to the Minister for his offer. Does he accept that part of the problem is that if people do not have confidence in the process and do not feel that it is being conducted in a transparent way—there is evidence that that is the case—they will say that the inquiry is likely to be a whitewash? He needs to reassure not just the families and my hon. Friends, but everybody concerned with the inquiry that the process will be transparent and open. In those circumstances, people would have more confidence in it.

David Mowat: I accept that, which is why I have made the offer. I guess the caveat is that, in the end, science will play a big part in getting to where we need to be. The science will find its own path, and I want to talk a little about how we are trying to achieve that.

As hon. Members have said, two years ago my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman), who was then the Minister for Life Sciences, established an inquiry that, at the time, was committed to having an independent review of the evidence and to attempting to find a scientific link between the hormone pregnancy test—in particular, Primodos—and the adverse effects on pregnancy and all that goes with it. It is worth saying at this point that, as hon. Members have said, this is an international issue that has been around for 40 to 50 years. We are the only country to have set up such an inquiry, and the only one to have attempted to find a scientific route to the truth in this way.

Hannah Bardell: Will the Minister give way?

David Mowat: I will continue to make progress, but will come back to the hon. Lady.

Two years ago, the MHRA was charged with putting the inquiry in place. It worked with the Commission on Human Medicines to set up an expert group, whose job was to establish whether there was a scientific link between the drugs prescribed and the adverse effects. The first meeting was a year after that, which was a long time. I apologise for that on behalf of the Government; I think it was too long. I have inquired why that was, and I have been told that there was the election and the purdah period, but it was too long. The group has met four times, and its next meeting is on Tuesday next week. I think we can all conclude that the members of the inquiry will be watching our proceedings and listening to the points that have been made. At that time, the review’s focus was on the science to establish whether it could be shown that there was a link between the drugs prescribed and the adverse effects. The terms of reference were subsequently altered to cover going into the lessons learned.

Hannah Bardell: I absolutely take on board what the Minister is saying—he is being very positive, and has clearly listened to the concerns we have raised—but I have a couple of comments. First, the fact that we are the only such country is surely a good thing given how far behind we lagged. We have an opportunity to lead the world on this and to show how this can be done positively. Secondly, as he says, no Government members want the inquiry to fall down. Is it not therefore his duty to intervene to make sure that it has the right resources, the right expertise and the right processes?

David Mowat: There is nothing in that intervention with which I disagree. We all want the inquiry to work. The Government have not established an inquiry in order for it to fail. We have not established an inquiry for it not to have the confidence of the association. We need to get to the truth, but that is a scientific process, and because it is a scientific process, it can be frustrating and long-winded; it can take a long time.

I want to talk about some of the concerns that have been raised. There were three types of concerns. The first was that the independent group of experts is not reviewing the regulatory concerns or the delays that took place at the time, in particular the failures of the then Committee on Safety of Medicines and the five or eight-year delay, which we have heard about. The UK was not the first country to ban the drug, but it was not the last either. The second concern, which I will talk about at some length, was that members of the expert group might not be independent and might not have fully declared their conflicts of interest. We have heard words like “colluding” and “cover-up” from some Members. The third concern was that not all the available evidence is being considered by the group, and we heard about the German material not being translated. I will address all three points.

On the first issue, we have heard that there was a regulatory failure and that the inquiry should look at it. I say to the House that if, when the expert group reports next spring, it finds a clear causal link, that will be the time to take further action on issues such as regulation and liability, and everything that goes with that. The first step we are taking is to establish the science. The group that has been set up is an expert group. It is science-led. It is important to make it clear in the House that we are not criticising individual members, because they are striving to get to the truth. It is a group of eminent people.
It would be quite wrong if we conflated the possible eventual need to look at the regulatory actions that were taken, the legal liabilities and everything that goes with that, with the first step of the process, which is to establish whether the science leads us to that link. In spite of some of the comments that have been made today, that has not been done yet in any country. The first serious attempt to do it is the one that is going on now.

The second concern is that the expert working group is not impartial. The MHRA has taken a vigorous approach to evaluating and handling potential conflicts of interest. No member of the expert working group can have any interest in any of the companies that were involved or their predecessors. Members should not have publicly expressed a strong opinion, favourable or unfavourable, about the possibility of birth defects arising from these drugs. We heard that one of the members had tweeted. If there is evidence of that, we will follow it up. It is true that one member not of the expert group, but of the advisory group was removed because it was felt that he had a conflict of interest that was not properly declared. Action was taken very quickly in respect of that.

The inquiry is chaired by a consultant gynaecologist from the Chalmers centre in Edinburgh. The group has 14 scientists drawn from some of the best universities in the UK. We have no reason to believe that any of them have any more reason not to want to get to the truth than Members on both sides of this House.

Maria Eagle: Does the Minister not realise how important it is that, whatever the rights and wrongs of this and whatever the qualities of the members of the panel, the families need to have confidence in it? There is no point in saying that they are all wonderful people. The families have concerns and if they are not assuaged, in one way or another, the outcome will not have their confidence.

David Mowat: I said at the start of my remarks that the learning point I have taken from this debate is that, whatever we think about the truth, the science and whether we are doing the right thing, the families are not happy. I also said that we will do what we can to amend that.

As well as that, Members on both sides of the House need to accept that we need to get to the scientific truth. In order to do that, there needs to be a scientific process. That has to happen and that is why some of this is time-consuming and difficult, even though we wish that it was not.

Mr George Howarth: The Minister is being generous in giving way. I am not sure that the terminology he is using is necessarily suitable. I do not understand this to be a scientific process per se. I understand it to be an informed judgment about the available evidence and, understandably, that is best conducted by scientists. I think he was a lawyer in a previous existence, so he will understand the difference between the two approaches.

David Mowat: I am guilty of many things, but I have never been a lawyer. However, in case I was not clear, I understand the difference between the two processes and accept the distinction that the right hon. Gentleman makes. The point I would make again, however, is that the panel has 14 members who have been chosen for particular skills in the issues involved, plus lay members who are not scientists.

Yvonne Fovargue: Will the Minister give way?

David Mowat: I will not, as there are only a couple of minutes left and the hon. Member for Bolton South East needs to sum up.

I will now address the third point that arose in the debate, namely whether all the available evidence will be reviewed by the expert group. The answer is yes. That is one reason why the process is taking so long. A specific question was raised about a great deal of evidence that has recently come to light which is in German. All that evidence will be translated, and all the translations will be put before the group. The chairman will be responsible for ensuring that that evidence is looked at and reviewed properly. There is absolutely no intention that the inquiry be anything other than a properly resourced attempt to get to the truth. That is difficult for something that happened 40 or 50 years ago. We all need to accept that point.

I finish by making the same point that I made at the start of my remarks. The Government are responsible for the efficacy of this inquiry, and we need to get to the right answer. It is important, and I accept, that the inquiry clearly does not have the confidence of some of the stakeholders. That is not acceptable or satisfactory.

I will make the same undertaking as was made by the then Minister for Life Sciences two years ago when putting the inquiry in place, namely that we will try to put things right. I make the offer again: if there is a letter giving the detail of the points that have been made, that letter will be answered and we will hold a meeting to discuss it subsequently.

4.56 pm

Yasmin Qureshi: I am conscious of the time. First, I thank all Members who have attended the debate. I thank the victims, some of whom are in the Gallery today, and Marie Lyon. I know we do not often refer to our staff, but I thank my researcher Sadia Ali, who has done incredible work on this issue with me for the past couple of years.

I am glad that the Minister has said that he will meet us, and we will happily write with detailed information about our concerns, but we need to emphasise again that, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) mentioned just a minute ago, the inquiry is not so much about the medical evidence. It is not carrying out experiments to ascertain whether there is a scientific link. The crux is that a lot of evidence was available at the time and the regulator failed to do anything. Also, the victims have not been heard properly so far. The inquiry needs to do that.

I accept the Minister’s assurances and will wait to see what happens.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House notes that an Expert Working Panel Group Inquiry was set up by the Government to investigate and assess evidence on children born with serious deformities due to hormone pregnancy test drugs taken by expectant mothers between 1953 and 1975; further notes with concern that the terms of reference as set out by the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency do not clearly allow for an investigation into the systematic
regulatory failures of government bodies at the time; notes the conflict of interest of some panel members; further notes that all evidence must be presented to expert panel members as set out in the terms of reference; calls on the Inquiry to ensure that all evidence is presented to the expert panel with sufficient time for due consideration; further calls on the Government to ensure that the inquiry has the trust and confidence of the victims for whom it was set up; and believes that, unless these changes are made, the ability of the Inquiry to achieve a fair outcome will be significantly compromised.

Independent Living: Disabled People

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

4.58 pm

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): I decided to call this debate because I wanted to highlight the cost of living people for disabled people. The truth is that disabled people should be able to learn, work and live independently without facing a financial penalty. Unfortunately, however, that is not the case. Whether because of a huge digital divide, or a wheelchair charge in taxis, or unaffordable social care, disabled people face a financial penalty in almost every aspect of their lives.

When we consider the ability to live independently in 21st-century Britain, we often think of factors such as growth, prices, wages and, of course, short-term shocks to the economy. But as we try to ensure that the taxpayers of this country can afford to get by and we put financial costs at the heart of policy making, we often overlook the fact that disabled people face a financial penalty that none of us have to face if we are able bodied. We do not think about the difficulties that disabled people face in order to live independently and the extra costs they face from time to time. Approaches to the root causes of these extra costs have been fragmented, and imbalances in the market mean that the costs of things disabled people have to buy, such as assistive technology, remain higher than they need to be.

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

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

Tulip Siddiq: Owing to the lack of time in the debate, I will focus mainly on the causes of the extra costs rather than the well-trodden path of existing support payments, although I acknowledge from the outset that the battle to manage the extra costs is made all the more difficult by the fact that state support is increasingly difficult to obtain.

As most people will be aware, the Government are currently undertaking a second review into personal independence payments. They must continue to protect PIP from any form of taxation or means-testing so that disabled people have adequate support to help meet extra costs. The PIP assessment cannot be said to reflect the extra costs that disabled people face, and the sector is clear that the Government must redesign the PIP assessment so that it more accurately captures the level of disabled people’s extra costs. However, it seems to me—I am sure many Members would agree—to be a grave injustice that disabled people face disproportionate costs to live a life of dignity and independence.

I am of the firm belief that a society is judged by how it protects the most vulnerable and the most needy. If we as a society allow those costs to mount, we are abandoning our principles, because we will be failing to protect the most vulnerable. In my constituency of Hampstead and Kilburn, there are around 12,000 disabled people of working age. According to February 2016 Department for Work and Pensions figures, the number
of my constituents in receipt of employment and support allowance, personal independence payments and incapacity benefits was at nearly 6,000. The number of people awarded PIP in London stands at just over 80,000.

My personal experience of supporting a disabled parent and the number of disabled people who live in my constituency is why I have brought the debate to the House. Some of the disabled people in my constituency live in the top 4% of income-deprived wards in the country. The extra pressures they are under are clear—they have been underlined heavily by the Extra Costs Commission in an independent report undertaken by Scope. I put my thanks to Scope on the record it has helped a lot with this debate. Scope has found that the average additional expense to a disabled person living in Britain is £550 per month, which means that disabled people are spending £6,500 per year to live a life in which they can independently eat, independently travel and independently function as part of a community. The consequences of that are profound.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that, severely disabled people who relied on the independent living fund to function—to eat independently, take part in society and so on—face additional problems, because the funding for the ILF has not been replaced? My constituent Mary Ellen Archer is an active member of the community but needs help for many hours every day so that she can eat when she wants, and get up and go out and about when she wants. By withdrawing ring-fenced funding from local authorities, the Government are making life almost impossible for people such as her to live a normal life.

Tulip Siddiq: I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend. Like her constituent Mary, others want to live independently and not be humiliated in their everyday living, and it is being made more difficult for them. The other point I should add in respect of my hon. Friend’s point is that people who are severely disabled are at the bottom of the ladder when it comes to receiving payments.

The consequences are profound. Disabled people are twice as likely to have unsecured debt totalling more than half of their household income. Disabled people are three times more likely to use payday loans. Disabled people have, on average, £100,000 less in savings and assets than non-disabled people. In London, where my constituency and the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) is based, 51% of disabled people have a household income of less than £10,000 compared to 19% of non-disabled Londoners. Worst of all, disabled people are twice as likely to live in poverty. That statistic should shame us all.

The ghastly £6,500 tax on living has been itemised by the Extra Costs Commission, with a clear set of recommendations on how to reduce it. It identified transport, energy, clothing, bedding, specialised disability equipment and insurance as areas where the impact of additional costs are most starkly felt. However, one year on since its publication, there has been only a piecemeal response from the Government. That is disappointing.

One area in which the Government could take great strides to support independent living, is through improving digital accessibility. Some 25% of disabled adults have never used the internet, compared to 6% of non-disabled adults, highlighting a considerable digital divide. Some disabled people face instances where websites are not accessible and others may not have the necessary skills to use the internet. For example, in London, Transport for London statistics reveal that only 46% of disabled people use the TfL website compared with 81% of non-disabled people.

A significant challenge in reducing extra costs is to unlock the potential of disabled people as a collective of consumers. Equal access to the internet for disabled people will empower them, and it will increase access to the job market and learning opportunities. The rewards for business will be great, with an estimated £420 million a week currently being lost through the failure to meet the needs of disabled people. Ultimately, however, it will enable disabled people to participate in an increasingly digital society and digital age.

A number of charities have suggested that the Equality and Human Rights Commission should review the impact of the Equality Act 2010 in improving web accessibility. I hope the Minister will consider the request carefully. It has also requested that the Government ensure that a proportion of existing and future funding for training in digital skills is targeted at disabled people who never or very rarely use the internet. Expanding digital access could be vital for reducing the disability employment gap, which is a critical factor in independent living. I will not cover this in detail today due to lack of time, but I simply note for the record that in London about 48% of all disabled residents in London are employed compared with 74% of non-disabled London residents. That needs serious attention. I know that right hon. and hon. Members across the House are focusing on this issue. I am sure the Minister will embrace the opportunities in her new brief and see this issue as a path to improving lives for disabled people.

Transport is a common and hugely restrictive area of extra cost for disabled people. They are much more regular users of taxis and buses. Section 165 of Labour’s Equality Act 2010 states that taxis and private hire vehicles are required to carry wheelchair users and that they must not charge extra for doing so. This, however, is flouted on a regular basis. Two thirds of wheelchair users report being overcharged when using taxis or private hire cars because of their wheelchair. That practice is unforgivable and must not be allowed to continue. I therefore join Leonard Cheshire, Scope and others in welcoming the decision by the Government to bring Section 165 of the Equality Act into force.

Seema Malhotra (Feltahm and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech and putting the issue firmly on the agenda in the House. On her points about accessibility to taxis and private hire vehicles, does she agree that that is because of some of the problems that people with disabilities can experience with public transport? My constituents have told me that that can sometimes include difficulties getting on buses, which mean they can be left in the cold and rain, waiting in the hope of getting on the next bus.

Tulip Siddiq: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention. I have seen real-life instances of what she describes in my constituency. I agree that we need to do more to ensure that Transport for London makes both buses and tube stations more accessible. Indeed, only 4% of
the tube stations in London have full wheelchair access. I am proud to say that our station here in Westminster has full wheelchair access, but there needs to be a focus on that all across London.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way and for raising this important issue. I hope we can shortly achieve a breakthrough in the long-running campaign for step-free access at Newbury Park station. As chair of the all-party group on taxis, may I say to her that the wheelchair accessibility of London’s black taxis is something in which drivers take immense pride? I share her concern that people should not be charging for wheelchair access, because the behaviour of the small number of taxi drivers who are engaged in that practice damages the otherwise excellent reputation of London’s iconic black taxi trade.

Tulip Siddiq: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I absolutely agree with him and recognise all the hard work he has done to secure the voices of black cab drivers in his area. Not long ago I was in a black cab with him and the driver instantly recognised him because of all the hard work he has been doing—he did not recognise me at all. My hon. Friend has been championing the voices of black cab drivers and he is absolutely right. Every time I am in a black cab, the driver is very supportive of me with my pram or my disabled father. It is a small number of people who are making it uncomfortable for disabled people to live and travel independently.

As the Minister will know, drivers have an obligation to comply with the Equality Act 2010. The problem is that compliance is not an explicit condition of licence. Making compliance an explicit condition of the licence would underline its importance and enable disabled people to live independent lives, get to work, visit friends, attend hospital appointments and do everything that we take for granted. Such changes would be crucial, especially in London, where 62% of all disabled residents define themselves as mobility impaired. Although 45% of disabled Londoners own a pass that gives them reduced fares or free travel, 26% of disabled people said in a recent survey that transport costs remained a barrier to use. The wheelchair charge in taxis will not be helping their public to travel, with a cost to the NHS and care services of up to £450 million.

I wish to give the Minister as big an opportunity as possible to cover all the areas I have raised, so I will close with these few comments. Disabled people deserve the same life opportunities as able-bodied people. They deserve to reap the same benefits from the legislation as able-bodied people. They deserve to shop in a market that treats them with the same dignity as able-bodied people. And they deserve homes that afford them the same dignity and independence as anyone else.

Having spoken with so many disabled constituents across my area about these costs, I am clear that the huge number of causes of these restrictive extra costs demands a cross-departmental approach from the Government in finding solutions. For too long, disabled people have had to rely on piecemeal, fragmented progress, and I sincerely hope that the Minister’s comments today will provide a strong framework in which disabled people can expect serious progress to be made over the course of this Parliament. As I mentioned earlier, I judge society by the way in which we look after the most vulnerable and the most needy. If we cannot look after disabled people, we are failing in our duty as members of society and as parliamentarians.

5.15 pm

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): I am delighted to respond to the debate. This is my first Adjournment debate in my new ministerial role, and I am now in my 13th week. One opportunity a new Minister has in getting acquainted with their new Department is to ask dumb questions. Many of the dumb questions I have asked over the last few weeks are very pertinent to the debate: “How did you arrive at that particular figure?”; “What exactly is this money for?”; “Who is actually responsible for ensuring that this is paid?”; and “How do we know this is value for money for the disabled person?”

If we consider the history of our welfare system and the other layers of support administered by local government and civil society, we see that the picture is incredibly complex and muddy. I therefore thank the hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn (Tulip Siddiq) and others who have contributed to the debate, because it affords me the opportunity not only to address some of the issues she raised, but hopefully to further the cause of simplicity, transparency and, critically, accessibility.

I very much welcome the work Scope has done. Historically, Governments have had little detail about what disabled people have had to, and are choosing to, spend their money on. Scope has yet formally to launch its latest report—I do not want to steal too much of its thunder—but has done a valuable service in identifying certain key areas where costs for disabled people are considerably higher. This is not just clothing, transport and equipment, but, as the hon. Lady mentioned, energy and insurance, too.

Other organisations have helped on this agenda—Age UK, to mention only one, which is understandable when so many older people are also disabled. It has
clearly established that the older people are, the higher their cost of living—an argument I have often deployed in defending the triple lock and pensioner benefits.

Part of the challenge of capturing these costs is that, apart from certain common trends, extra costs are so personal to the individual. Governments have therefore hypothecated for these additional costs for daily living or mobility. Increasingly and importantly, as we have seen with the Care Act 2014 and the personal independence payment, we leave the individual with a choice on how to spend that money. The spending power that a person has—that empowerment—is the best safeguard against poor-quality services and poor-quality provision. A disabled person will always be better than any five star-rated local authority in spending that money.

The other motivation for PIP was to ensure that we were directing money to those in the greatest need and with the most significant ongoing costs. Designed to cover those extra costs, PIP also improved on the disability living allowance by, critically, recognising mental health conditions, learning disabilities and sensory impairments, as well as physical disabilities. There are now more than 220,000 people receiving over £7,250 a year to help with these additional costs.

Under DLA, only 15% received the highest level of support, while it is 24% under PIP. Under DLA, only 22% of those living with a mental health condition received the enhanced daily living component, while under PIP the figure is 66%. The number of people on the Motability scheme has gone up since PIP was introduced, but we are keen further to improve its working. We have a programme of continuous improvement and evaluation by expert external bodies and stakeholders, including the Disability Charities Consortium. I am pleased that Paul Gray will lead a second review following his extremely helpful report, on which we have acted.

The forthcoming Green Paper affords us a further opportunity to look at those processes holistically, and to look at the person’s whole journey, whatever his or her personal destination might be. We have already made public the intention to stop retests for employment and support allowance when it makes no sense, and we hope that we can do more to reduce the bureaucracy and the burden on the individual. We must seize the opportunity presented by the Green Paper, and I urge every Member with an interest to engage in that consultation.

We also need more clarity about the vast array of support that is out there to ensure that the reach of our programmes and schemes matches the need. It is no good having an Access to Work scheme, a disabled facilities grant or 15 hours’ free childcare if people do not know about it and are not taking it up. However, as the hon. Lady said, we also have a duty to ensure that disabled people have every opportunity to secure best value for money.

Members have spent much time on the Floor of the House discussing energy costs, and I am confident that both Scope and the Government will continue to focus on them. Insurance markets can also afford more opportunities. There are certain practices that do, I think, require more Government action. The hon. Lady mentioned transport, and I agree that the scandal of charging disabled people higher fares is grossly exploitative. As one who has long campaigned on the quality of rail franchise agreements and the comfort, facilities and experience of the travelling public, I can tell the hon. Lady that she is preaching to the choir when she highlights the different treatment that disabled people experience on public transport.

I could give many other examples. However, I want to make it clear that this is not just about disabled people being short-changed—charged more and getting less for their money—but about businesses that are missing opportunities. The combined spending power of disabled people is immense. Some of the Department’s analysts have been working on the subject, and I can tell the House that we have vastly underestimated the spending power of that group. We will make the findings public shortly. Businesses, however, seem content to miss out on a huge customer base. Stores and products are inaccessible, irrelevant, or not even worth considering owing to the lack of accessible toilets. For some, spending a penny—in every sense—can be extremely difficult.

We need to change that. We need to help businesses and other organisations to understand what they must do, and, with us, really understand what the unmet need is and what the game-changing investments will be, in equipment, in technology, and—as the hon. Lady rightly pointed out—in connectivity. How can we drive down the costs, achieve faster take-up, and ensure that Government-funded services provide real value for money for a disabled person? Tackling the costs of living and the digital agenda to which the hon. Lady referred, and improving the targeting and reach of our welfare and support services, is only one half of the equation. If we want everyone in our society to enjoy a good quality of life, financial resilience and wellbeing, we must not only continue to improve welfare, tackle the extra costs and champion the disabled consumer; we must increase incomes as well.

Giving more people the opportunities that come with a pay packet and a career is part of that. The disability employment gap is a scandal. It is a scandal that disabled people have not had the opportunities that others enjoy, it is a scandal that businesses and other organisations have been missing out on huge talent and insight in the workforce, and it is a scandal that the costs of unemployment—people not having the chance to have meaningful activity in their lives and all the health benefits that we know come with it—have been piled on to our public services. We have been tackling the problem in a number of ways, and I thank all Members who have helped the Department by, for instance, running Disability Confident events, but we need to do more.

The Green Paper—the first of its kind, truly joint with health—will move the debate to where it needs to be, and create the momentum it requires. The paper should also consider the resilience and opportunities of carers, and the need to ensure that they can nurture their own ambitions and dreams as well as their loved ones. That includes being economically active, either now or in the future, if that is their wish.

As well as ensuring that opportunities are open to disabled people seeking work, if we are to make more than a dent in the disability employment gap we must also create more jobs, including jobs that offer the activities and flexibilities that disabled people want and need. There is much good work in that space, but it is often down to considerable luck that such ventures are created, with the right people from education, the local enterprise partnership, the council and social enterprise...
being in the right place at the right time. We must make such ventures more mainstream, more frequent and more the norm.

The number of people with a learning disability who benefit from such opportunities is considerable, and we must grip this issue in order to afford them the income and experiences that they are currently being denied. Such activity forms part of every think-tank-produced checklist for a good life I have ever seen, together with a warm secure home, financial resilience, opportunities and choice, connectivity, the ability to travel and a social life. These are all things that enable a person to reach their full potential, and we must ensure that people do that, or our nation never will.

Ruth Cadbury: The Minister waxes lyrical about the importance of disabled people being able to participate in society—to work and to socialise if they want to—but does she not recognise the fact that the withdrawal of funds to key services and the withdrawal of benefits make that aspiration virtually impossible?

Penny Mordaunt: I would take issue with what the hon. Lady says about this Government’s record. I have mentioned some statistics on PIP, and I could mention others relating to how we are using the increasing welfare bill better and in a more targeted way. I do agree, however, that we need to join these things up much better.

I welcome the tone taken by hon. Member for Hampstead and Kilburn in an article that she wrote for her local paper, in which she called for more cross-party working on these issues. Politics can often be divisive, and these issues are too important not to make common good, and common cause. Welfare reform is often lengthy, but certainty and stability are desirable. Such is the scale of the challenges that we need everyone to work towards the change we need in business, services and products, in the public sector and in our communities. We need to link the national to the local. We need closer working across all sectors, and we need the opportunities that the third sector brings to be understood and capitalised on by commissioners. We need all parts of the public sector to work better together, and utilising the data that we all have will be a game changer for delivery. We need to extend our reach to those patient groups and peer support forums that we do not currently work with. We need to build consensus, common good and common cause across all sectors.

In the hon. Lady’s constituency, local government consultations are taking place right now that will impact on the people we have been discussing today. It is no good even the most perfect policy being formed in Whitehall if it cannot be delivered on the ground. It is no good having a wonderfully evaluated Work programme if the person who could benefit from it does not know about it, or if the type of benefit they are on precludes them from benefiting from it. It is no good a person getting into work, or getting a college place, if their bus pass does not work before the hour they need to start. It is no good a person having a back-to-work plan if they cannot access the healthcare intervention they need to be sufficiently pain-free to hold down a job.

If we are to continue to improve welfare delivery, to close the disability employment gap, to build resilience and choice, to open businesses’ eyes to the possibilities, to enforce the Equality Act 2010 and to continue job creation with everyone in mind, we need a cultural change towards disability. It needs to be part of the mainstream, because it is the mainstream. It needs to be at the heart of every consideration and every plan.

The new role that I occupy, the fact we are in the youth of this Parliament—although it might not feel like it at times—the raised awareness of these issues, the new opportunities technology brings and the Green Paper will all present an opportunity to achieve those aims. Colleagues must maximise these opportunities, along with their councillors, their local Jobcentre Plus team, their healthcare professionals, businesses and the third sector organisations in their patch. We need hon. Members’ help, and I hope that they will give it.

Question put and agreed to.

5.30 pm

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

WORK AND PENSIONS

The Secretary of State was asked—

Disabled People: Government Support

1. Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help disabled people to access Government support.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Damian Green): On the day that the country is celebrating our Paralympic athletes, I am sure the whole House will want to join me in thanking them for a summer of thrilling and inspirational sport.

It is right that we continually review the way support is offered to and accessed by disabled people. That is why I was pleased to announce an end to stressful and bureaucratic employment and support allowance reassessments for people with the most severe lifetime conditions. We are also transforming the way disabled people access support through our new digital Access to Work platform and providing help to budding disabled entrepreneurs to set up their own business.

Kevin Hollinrake: I am holding a round-table event on 31 October for those with disabilities, parents and employers, to try to remove the barriers to employment. Does the Secretary of State agree that for some the barriers are simply too high? Will he welcome the positive response from Disability Rights UK to his recent announcement that those with severe lifetime conditions and severe disabilities will not have to undergo regular repeat assessments of their condition?

Damian Green: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the round table. He is right that there are too many barriers to work for disabled people, and this Government are determined to do everything possible to break down those barriers. Like him, I was pleased that a number of disability groups welcomed the announcement that I made on 1 October. I was particularly pleased to see the chief executive of the MS Society, Michelle Mitchell, say that it was a victory for common sense. She went on to say:

“We are therefore delighted that the Government has listened to our concerns and have agreed to stop reassessments”.

I am pleased that the sector was so pleased with the announcement.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): I, too, welcome the Secretary of State’s announcement. Which conditions will the exemption cover, and when does he expect the change to be introduced?

Damian Green: It is not so much the conditions as the individuals. We apply the exemption on an individual basis, as there are clearly conditions where at some stages people will be able to work and at other stages they will not be able to work, so the exemption covers conditions that can only deteriorate as well as conditions that may stay the same. On timing, we will be consulting on a wide range of measures in the work and health Green Paper, which my predecessor promised would be with us by the end of the year, and I am happy to repeat that promise today.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I, too, welcome the announcement that people with severe lifelong conditions will no longer face repeated work capability assessments. My right hon. Friend has clearly recognised how stressful people find these assessments. Although mental health conditions can follow an unpredictable path, will he consider taking steps to reduce the stress and trauma experienced by people with long-term mental health conditions undergoing work capability assessments?

Damian Green: I am happy to try to reassure my hon. Friend about that because she is right. One of the things that has improved in the diagnosis field has been the number of people who have been correctly diagnosed with mental health conditions in recent years, and clearly this is a group who in some cases have particular difficulties in getting back to work. The stress and strain of constant reassessment may well contribute to that, so we are always looking at ways of improving the assessment that we do to make sure that they achieve what they are meant to achieve and do not just act as an increaser of strain on people.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): Constituents who have been refused employment and support allowance tell me that they are experiencing barriers being put in their way when they apply for mandatory reconsideration of the decision. They tell me that they are being told to put the application in writing and to give reasons in advance, and then if the request is rejected they are not given reasons for the refusal. Will the Secretary of State take a look at this situation because it does seem that there is a deliberate attempt on the part of at least some officials to thwart people in having their cases reconsidered?

Damian Green: I am not at all aware of officials actively acting to thwart mandatory reconsideration. As the hon. Lady will know, the Social Security Advisory Committee supported the mandatory reconsideration, but there are a number of recommendations on the table that we are looking at and that will improve the process. With all these processes, there is a need for continuous improvement, and that is what we will seek to do.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): My right hon. Friend’s announcement will be particularly welcome to a constituent of mine who is a long-term mental illness
sufferer. He has been sectioned four times and is still required to have the work capability assessment. I very much hope that the process to which my right hon. Friend referred will be quick one and that people such as my constituent will soon be able to benefit from this announcement.

**Damian Green:** Yes, I quite take the point my hon. Friend has made—certainly as he describes the constituency case he has taken up. Someone like that should not be reassessed while we are establishing the details of the appropriate guidance so that the new system can be put into effect.

**Dr Eilidh Whiteford** (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): I am glad the Government have said they are going to end the needless and distressing practice of reassessing work capability people with lifelong, progressive and incurable conditions. I hope the Secretary of State now accepts that his predecessors got this very badly wrong over recent years. Will he now take steps to overhaul the work capability assessment to ensure that all ESA claimants, including those with invisible and fluctuating conditions, are treated with dignity and respect?

**Damian Green:** I am grateful for the support for my announcement from those Benches, even though I sense it came through slightly gritted teeth. As I have said to previous questioners, we are constantly looking at ways of improving the work capability assessment, and of course that work will carry on.

**Dr Whiteford:** I thought I was being quite restrained.

The other thing the Government have got badly wrong in recent times is the decision to cut financial support to ESA claimants in the work-related activity group—people assessed as currently unfit for work. At the time, that decision caused huge disquiet on both sides of the House, and deep anger and concern outside it. With those changes due to come into effect shortly, will the Secretary of State make representations to the Chancellor ahead of the autumn statement to reinstate that support, which sick and disabled people need so badly?

**Damian Green:** As I am sure the hon. Lady knows, no one who is already claiming ESA in that group will see a cash loss. What we are seeking to do is to make it as easy as possible for as many people as possible to get into work, because doing a job is, for most people, the best route out of poverty. The various changes announced by my predecessors were all aiming at that end, which is the best one for the vast majority of people receiving these benefits.

**Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): The Government’s climbdown regarding their discredited work capability assessment is welcome, but given that 60% of people who appeal against their WCA decision are successful, that academics estimate that between 2010 and 2013 an additional 590 suicides were associated with WCA and that the Government’s data show that 60% of people who have been found fit for work are four times more likely to die than the general population, why will the Work and Pensions Secretary not scrap the WCA process immediately and completely?

**Damian Green:** Because the work capability assessment, which was, of course, introduced by a Labour Government, has been reviewed five times since 2010, and each time we have improved it. I am glad that the hon. Lady has welcomed the recent improvements that we have introduced. [ Interruption. ] I would be grateful if she waited for her next question before she asks it. One thing I would particularly take issue with her over is her implied link between suicides and the work capability assessment. I do think that that is an unhelpful use of what is always clearly a deeply tragic situation for political ends. I think she will have known that there is no direct evidence to support that, and I do not think it is a very constructive way to seek to improve the work capability assessment.

**Debbie Abrahams:** Just as a point of fact, these are academic estimates, and the Government’s data show that people have died.

Unlike with the work capability assessment, the Government plan continually to assess all disabled people for the personal independence payment, regardless of their disability or condition, regardless of the fact that 59% of PIP appeals are successful and regardless of the wholly inappropriate process. After the outcry over proposed cuts to PIP in the Budget, and having had to abandon proposals to restrict access to PIP by changing eligibility to the daily living component, the Government are looking for alternative ways to make cuts to PIP—this time by changing the guidance and making it harder for disabled people successfully to appeal PIP decisions. Are the Government not ashamed that they are putting disabled people in such dire circumstances?

**Damian Green:** I am not at all ashamed of the introduction of PIP or the fact that many more people are eligible to receive PIP than were eligible to receive disability living allowance. It is a better benefit, and most of the disability support groups recognise that it is a better benefit, so I simply do not recognise the hon. Lady’s characterisation of PIP.

**Personal Independence Payment: Autism**

2. **Ian C. Lucas** (Wrexham) (Lab): What assessment his Department has made of the effect of the introduction of personal independence payment on benefit claimants with autism.

**Penny Mordaunt:** (Penny Mordaunt) (Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work) (Penny Mordaunt): The personal independence payment assessment is designed with all health conditions and impairments in mind, including autism. About 38% of those with autism are currently receiving higher rates of PIP.

**Ian C. Lucas:** Autism is a complex medical condition, and there is a fundamental failure in the personal independence payment system in that assessments are being made by people who have no detailed knowledge of the medical condition involved. Will the new Secretary of State and the Minister assess whether it is possible to have real medics and people with professional medical opinions carrying out assessments, so that these people can be looked after?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the important fact that the assessment and the person’s experience of it are appropriate. He is quite wrong to say that these are not healthcare professionals. Both our assessment providers’ training covers autism.
Capital and Atos give their health professionals specific information that has been developed by the National Autistic Society.

**Child Poverty**

3. Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): What steps his Department is taking to reduce child poverty.  

11. Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): What steps he plans to take to reduce levels of child poverty.  

**The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Damian Green):** Work is the best route out of poverty. There are 557,000 fewer children in workless households than in 2010. The Prime Minister is clear that tackling poverty and disadvantage, and delivering real social reform, is a priority for this Government. To that end, I will be returning to the House with a number of announcements over the coming months.

Patricia Gibson: The latest OECD figures show the that the risk of income poverty is growing for young people, and that was before the impact of the coming into force of benefit cuts hitting children. Will the Secretary of State accept the warnings from the Institute for Fiscal Studies that child poverty will increase by 50% in the next few years and abandon the cuts to universal credit, which will punish low-paid workers, especially single parents?

Damian Green: I simply point out to the hon. Lady that since 2010 there are 100,000 fewer children in poverty in this country, and, overall, 300,000 fewer people in poverty. I have already said that work is the best route out of poverty. I am sure that she, like me, will welcome the fact that we have far more people in work in this country than most other advanced countries. That is the best long-term way to ensure that children do not suffer poverty.

Lisa Nandy: I very much welcome the change of tone since the Secretary of State took up his new position, but what I would really like to see now is a change in policy. He should be ashamed that the IFS is predicting a staggering 50% increase in child poverty over the course of this Parliament under his Government, who are still committed to a policy where a living wage does not pay enough to live on and where tax and benefit changes will be directly responsible for that increase in child poverty. When will the 2.5 million children who currently go without enough food to eat—who go hungry in this country—see some real action from this Government?

Damian Green: I disagree with the hon. Lady on the points that she makes on income and on tax. On income, the introduction of the national living wage means that a full-time worker who was previously on the national minimum wage is now £900 a year better off, and many children will benefit from that. On tax, over the course of the previous Parliament, we took 4 million of the lowest paid out of income tax altogether. Those are practical measures that help people on low incomes and help children in low-income households.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): As the Secretary of State will know from his recent visit to my constituency, earlier this year I worked with local Bath charity St John’s Hospital to set up the Action Against Child Poverty group in Bath, bringing together over 50 charities and £100,000 of funding to tackle the issue of the one in five children who live in poverty in my constituency. Will he agree to meet Action Against Child Poverty in Bath, this time in London—don’t worry!—to learn about the group’s work and extend his congratulations on its work?

Damian Green: I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in congratulating the group in his constituency. It is exactly the sort of thing that one wants to hear that the third sector is doing, and I am happy to meet the group. I am grateful that he is depriving me of yet another trip to Bath. I am always happy to go there, but I quite like to spread myself around the country a bit.

Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Helping parents on jobseeker’s allowance or income support to start their own business is one way of reducing child poverty. Will the Secretary of State support the new enterprise allowance, which helps unemployed people to start their own business and raise household incomes?

Damian Green: The new enterprise allowance is indeed an extremely helpful tool in our armoury of ways to help disabled people. We have seen 20,000 firms started up—20,000 disabled people helped—through the new enterprise allowance. I intend to continue and expand the scheme, which is so good for disabled people.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) said in March 2014 that he believed the Government would eradicate child poverty by 2020, yet, as has already been mentioned, the Child Poverty Action Group highlighted last week that child poverty is set to rise by 50% by 2020. Does the Secretary of State agree with the former Secretary of State or with the Child Poverty Action Group, and are the Government still committed to eradicating child poverty by 2020?

Damian Green: The Government are certainly committed to reducing child poverty. The Child Poverty Action Group made a number of specific demands. One demand was to expand childcare support, which the Government have done, extending the 15-hour offer to the most disadvantaged two-year-olds. Universal credit now reimburses up to 85% of childcare costs, up from 70%. CPAG also demanded support to progress in low-paid work—it is absolutely right about that—and we are undertaking a number of trials to deliver evidence on in-work progression, which will be delivered by Jobcentre Plus, because I agree with CPAG that that is an extremely good step forward.

Margaret Greenwood: In 2011, the Government said that universal credit would lift 350,000 people out of poverty. By 2013, that had been downgraded to just 150,000. The Office for Budget Responsibility published its report on welfare trends last week and made it clear that the cuts going ahead under universal credit will mean that it will be less generous than tax credits. How many children, if any, do the Government expect universal credit to lift out of poverty?
Damian Green: Universal credit, which is now being paid to more than 300,000 people, has already shown that people will get into work and progress in work faster and that they are more likely to seek work. If the Opposition accept, as I think they do, that work is the best route out of poverty, they will welcome universal credit because, when it is paid to more parents it helps children in those families to be in households where there is work. That will be the best way to get them out of poverty.

State Pension Age: Women

4. Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Whether his Department plans to take steps to introduce transitional protection for women adversely affected by the acceleration of increases in the state pension age.

14. Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): Whether his Department plans to take steps to introduce transitional protection for women adversely affected by the acceleration of increases in the state pension age.

16. Nick Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): Whether his Department plans to take steps to introduce transitional protection for women adversely affected by the acceleration of increases in the state pension age.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Pensions (Richard Harrington): Transitional arrangements are already in place. We committed £1 billion to lessen the impact of the state pension age changes on those who were affected, so that no one would experience a change of more than 18 months. In fact, 81% of women's state pension ages will increase by no more than 12 months, compared with the previous timetable.

Carolyn Harris: Last week, I and more than 100 cross-party colleagues presented petitions in support of the Women Against State Pension Inequality campaign. Will the Minister acknowledge that those women have been subject to a grave injustice and that now is the time for the Government to introduce appropriate transitional payments for the women most affected by the pension changes?

Richard Harrington: I can only reiterate to the hon. Lady what has been said many times before. The Government made transitional arrangements that came to more than £1 billion. [Interruption.] She is chuntering at me from a sedentary position. I could not hear, but will try to imagine what she was saying. The Government have made the transitional arrangements, and no further moves will be made to assist those women, all of whom will benefit in time from the significant increase in the new state pension.

Gill Furniss: There are shocking reports of women affected by the changes introduced last April being left destitute. Many of them who have been on low pay all their lives where occupational pension schemes were not open to them have taken on caring responsibilities, saving this country lots of money. What immediate measures will the Government take to address this appalling situation and put these wrongs right?

Richard Harrington: Those women, or indeed those men, under the state pension age who are in the position of destitution the hon. Lady mentions are fully entitled to a comprehensive benefits system, of which I am sure she is aware.

Nic Dakin: I pay tribute to Rosemary Jordan and the north Lincolnshire WASPI group. The Minister is better than the answers he has just given. These women are being badly affected. The Prime Minister has given a commitment to this nation to look after those people who are just managing, and the women I have seen in my surgery are just managing as a result of these pension changes. The transitional arrangements that were made back in 2011 are not good enough. I urge the Minister to go back to the Department and improve the offer.

Richard Harrington: As the hon. Gentleman is aware, I have said many times, as have other Ministers, that the transitional arrangements have cost more than £1 billion and there are arrangements in place for those people in destitution. It becomes a question of the public money that is spent. At the moment, the new state pensions are costing £89 billion a year, plus pension credit and everything else, and there is no further money available.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I am very surprised that no Government Members want to ask questions about this topic. The Prime Minister celebrated her 60th birthday earlier this month, making her part of that sisterhood of 1950s-born women who have been so shabbily treated by her predecessor's Government. My hon. Friend the Members for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and for Scunthorpe (Nick Dakin) have already referred to the mass petitions organised by WASPI, and we have heard about the amazing change of mind of not one but two previous pensions Ministers, who have acknowledged that the whole thing was wrong and a bit of a mess. Unlike other members of the special sisterhood, the Prime Minister will probably not have to rely on the state pension, but will the Minister appeal to his boss to use the power she has and to compensate some of the most needy women in our society?

Richard Harrington: I find it strange that the hon. Gentleman and his party were in the House when the Pensions Act 2011 was passed, yet their 2015 manifesto made no mention whatsoever of negating it.

Personal Independence Payments: Applications

5. Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): What support is available for people who require assistance to complete personal independence payment application forms.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery (Caroline Nokes): Department for Work and Pensions visiting officers can assist people with the completion of their PIP forms in their own homes, as can family and friends. Claimants can also authorise another person or organisation to help them handle their PIP claim.

Tom Pursglove: I am grateful to the Minister for that answer, but completing the forms can be a particularly difficult experience for those with mental health conditions.
I was pleased to hear what the Secretary of State said earlier about reassessments, but what specific help and support is provided to that particular group of applicants?

**Caroline Nokes:** We want to help people with the form as much as possible. That is why we give them up to a month to complete the return form, as well as additional time if they require it. We provide guidance online so that friends and family can look at it and go on to assist the person with the completion of the form. We also allow them to use their own words to describe their condition and to provide as much detail as they would like, or as much as their condition allows.

22. [906598] **Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab):** As chair of the all-party parliamentary groups on Parkinson’s and on motor neurone disease, I met the Minister’s predecessor, the hon. Member for North Swindon (Justin Tomlinson), many times. The problems of people with motor neurone disease and Parkinson’s are such that, often, by the time the form is in, their condition has progressed excessively. Will the Minister meet me and the charities associated with those conditions to discuss the issue?

**Caroline Nokes:** There are opportunities in the Green Paper for exactly that sort of information to be fed back, and my hon. Friend the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work will be delighted to provide as much support as is needed.

**Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab):** My constituent John Mullen had been working abroad for two years when he fell ill earlier this year with relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis. When he came back to this country, he was told that he would not qualify for personal independence payments until January 2018. Given what the Secretary of State has said about relaxing the cuts in welfare payments, will the Minister look at his case personally and make sure that my constituent has the money that he needs right now?

**Caroline Nokes:** As the hon. Gentleman knows, we cannot intervene in individual cases, but if he sends the detail of the specific problem with regard to those who have lived abroad and moved back, my hon. Friend the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work will be delighted to look at it.

**Benefit Eligibility Assessment: People with Disabilities**

7. **Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con):** What steps his Department is taking to improve the benefit eligibility assessment process for people with disabilities.

**The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt):** The Department is committed to improving continuously assessments for all our benefits, and we have responded to a range of recommendations from a number of independent reviews. As part of our continuous review of the work capability assessment, we will be consulting on further possible improvements in the forthcoming Green Paper.

**Huw Merriman:** I welcome the Government’s recent announcement. May I ask the Department to consider creating an individual health statement for each disability claimant to give every local and national agency that is responsible for paying benefits access to the relevant information, so that we can end the practice of repetitive form-filling and evidence gathering? That would reduce individual stress on the vulnerable and reduce bureaucracy in our essential public services.

**Penny Mordaunt:** That is a sensible suggestion, and I thank my hon. Friend for making it. If we can use all the data that Government hold—for example, care plans or evidence for someone’s war pension—better to reduce stress and bureaucracy for individuals and arrive more quickly at a good result on the assessment, we should do so.

**Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab):** How confident is the Minister of the robustness of emergency payments for disabled people who lose their ESA or PIP? What would she say to my constituent who suffers from chronic lymphoedema? He wrote to me two weeks ago, having lost his benefit:

> “I can’t seem to concentrate on what I should do. I have no money at all. My electricity and my gas have run out. As for food I don’t know what to do.”

How can we have a system in which people are left in such a predicament?

**Penny Mordaunt:** I am sorry to hear of the circumstances of the hon. Lady’s constituent. Enormous numbers of decisions are made on ESA, PIP and on all sorts of other benefits. In some cases, the wrong decision is taken and it is overturned on appeal. We need to concentrate on ensuring that we arrive at the right decision in the first place. That has been our focus over the last few weeks, and we are doing a lot of work to ensure that medical and other evidence is submitted earlier in the process so that such circumstances do not arise. I would be very happy to look at the situation of the hon. Lady’s constituent.

**Personal Independence Payments: Assessments**

8. **Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP):** What steps his Department is taking to ensure that personal independence payment assessments are undertaken fairly and appropriately.

10. **John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP):** What steps his Department is taking to ensure that personal independence payment assessments are undertaken fairly and appropriately.

21. **Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op):** What steps his Department is taking to ensure that personal independence payment assessments are undertaken fairly and appropriately.

**The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt):** Our policy is developed by utilising service user panels. Provision is strictly monitored and measured by independent audit, and the provider is held to account through the contract that we have with them.

**Martyn Day:** For the fourth year in a row, the Infrastructure and Projects Authority has said that the roll-out of the personal independence payment project is “in doubt with major risks…apparent in a number of key areas.”
What action is the Minister taking to address the urgent problems with the PIP assessment, which is causing further hardship to disabled people trying to access vital support?

Penny Mordaunt: I start by pointing out that PIP is a vast improvement on what went before. It is a more targeted benefit and it takes into account a whole raft of other conditions, such as mental health and sensory conditions, not just physical disability. It is a vast step forward in that respect. We cannot rest on our laurels, however. We must continually improve, and there is a robust improvement process, based on user and claimant feedback, which looks at the assessment and also at record keeping and a raft of other areas.

John Nicolson: Let us examine that claim. My constituent Leila Kennedy lives with dwarfism, and her Motability car was removed from her after a PIP assessment. She had to use public transport, which she was unable to do, and she lost her job as a result. Does the Minister really think that Government policy is delivering compassionate outcomes in such cases?

Penny Mordaunt: I hope that the hon. Gentleman will write to me with further details of that case. Under PIP, more people are entitled to use the Motability scheme, but clearly we want to make sure that any decision taken on a PIP assessment is the right one. A key part of that, as we know from looking at cases that have been overturned on appeal, is getting the evidence submitted earlier in the process.

Christina Rees: Reports suggest that Capita rewards its assessors on the basis of how many assessments they complete every month, which leads to rushed assessments where applicants are not given enough time to describe how their condition affects them daily. What is the Minister doing to ensure that applicants are given enough time and that such a reward system is not operating?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. Historically, we have not paid benefit during assessment. The key to cracking this is to ensure that the assessment is done correctly. I would point out to him that the mandatory reconsideration process would be over before the person had to return the vehicle.

Disabled People: Recruitment and Retention

9. Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to increase awareness among employers of the value of recruiting and retaining disabled people.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): Building on the work of my predecessor, we have introduced a new Disability Confident scheme to identify the value that disabled people bring to businesses and to give employers the tools and techniques they need to recruit, retain and develop them. The new scheme went live in July, and it will be formally launched soon. I must thank my hon. Friend for being an early adopter.

Graham Evans: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer, and I pay tribute to her predecessor. Earlier this year, I held my fifth annual jobs and apprenticeship fair at Mid Cheshire College in Weaver Vale. In July, I undertook my first Disability Confident fair, where I signed up 19 Cheshire businesses to become Disability Confident employers. Will my hon. Friend tell the House what steps the Government are taking to encourage more small and medium-sized enterprises to take up this very important role?

Penny Mordaunt: In addition to the Disability Confident scheme, we are trialling the small employer offer, which will provide some additional support to those who may have less capacity within their own organisation. We are also working closely with the Health and Safety Executive, with its reach to SMEs, to target our services better.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): Recent analysis suggests that, as well as an employment gap, there is a wage gap of about 13% between disabled workers and their non-disabled counterparts. What is the Minister going to do to raise employers’ awareness of this abuse?

Penny Mordaunt: I thank my hon. Friend. Friend for that answer. I pay tribute to her predecessor. Earlier this year, I held my fifth annual jobs and apprenticeship fair at Mid Cheshire College in Weaver Vale. In July, I undertook my first Disability Confident fair, where I signed up 19 Cheshire businesses to become Disability Confident employers. Will my hon. Friend tell the House what steps the Government are taking to encourage more small and medium-sized enterprises to take up this very important role?
Penny Mordaunt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising that important point. We quite often talk about getting people into work, but we clearly also want them to have a career: we want them to develop, reach their full potential and pursue all their talents. The Green Paper, which we will publish shortly, will look at some of these issues, but the beefed-up Disability Confident scheme will also be very effective in doing that.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Scope’s research shows that 85% of disabled people feel that employers’ attitudes to employing them have not improved during the past four years. Should not more employers follow the lead of employers such as Waitrose, John Lewis, Morrisons and Marks & Spencer in my constituency and put practical support in place to help disabled people, particularly when they are applying for jobs in the first place?

Penny Mordaunt: I agree with my right hon. Friend. We need to do more to ensure that the support we offer is understood by employers. Disability Confident will help with that. We also need to raise employers’ awareness of what they are missing: huge talent and huge insight in their workforce. We will shortly bring forward schemes which will do just that.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister may be aware there is a massive pool of talent among people who suffer from neurolinguistic difficulties and challenges, and autism and dyslexia. What more can the Government do to show that, if we recognise their challenges, these young and old people make very good employees?

Penny Mordaunt: Absolutely; part of the solution is ensuring that our own staff are fully aware and able to encourage employers to take on these people. There are many other things we can do to highlight the positive contribution they have made. We are doing a huge amount of work with Hidden Impairment, including training our staff and our ongoing communication with employers.

Financial Literacy

12. Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase financial literacy and money management skills among people in receipt of benefits who are in debt.

The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds): We are committed to battling financial exclusion. Under universal credit, through universal support, we are working with partners to help claimants manage their finances and avoid debt.

Suella Fernandes: Sixteen million adults have less than £100 in savings, with younger adults, larger families and single parents most at risk of struggling with their personal finances. The all-party group on financial education for young people, which I chair, has, supported by Young Enterprise, concluded that people need better money management skills in life. What steps is my hon. Friend taking to increase financial education and money management skills for young people and those in receipt of benefits?

Damian Hinds: I commend my hon. Friend for her work with the all-party group, which has been particularly effective. In jobcentres, the first work search interview provides the opportunity to identify barriers, including financial capability. Under universal credit, personal budgeting support can be offered in partnership with jobcentres, local authorities and other local service providers.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Member for Fareham (Suella Fernandes) for asking that very important question. The new Money and Mental Health Policy Institute, of which I am a member, highlighted that it is so much harder to recover from mental illness if one is in debt. Adults with mental health conditions are three times more likely to be in debt than adults without mental health conditions. What specifically is the Minister doing to ensure that people with a mental condition who are in receipt of benefits and in debt are supported appropriately?

Damian Hinds: The most important thing we do is work in partnership at a local level with mental health organisations such as Mind to increase understanding of jobcentre operations on these issues, as well as to extend help to individual claimants. It is very important to understand the full range of barriers and challenges that somebody may face.

Supported Housing

13. Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): What plans his Department has to help ensure long-term, sustainable and predictable funding for the supported housing sector.

19. Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): What progress his Department is making on its proposal for a new supported accommodation funding model.

25. Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): What plans his Department has to help ensure long-term, sustainable and predictable funding for the supported housing sector.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Welfare Delivery (Caroline Nokes): The Secretary of State announced in a written ministerial statement on 15 September 2016 that we will be deferring the application of local housing allowance rates for supported housing until 2019-20. At that point, we will bring in a new funding model.

Vicky Foxcroft: In Lewisham, funding for supported accommodation has fallen by more than half since 2010. My constituent Winston Morris suffers from multiple sclerosis and is wholly reliant on his wheelchair. He was made homeless and had to move into his sister’s living room, where he sleeps, eats, uses the commode and bathes. More than a year later, he is still there. Despite being on the housing waiting list, there is no clear timeframe for when he will be rehoused. This is completely unacceptable. Will the Minister meet me to discuss his case to prevent other vulnerable people from falling into similar situations?

Caroline Nokes: Local authorities are absolutely best placed to make decisions on supporting vulnerable people in their own areas and commissioning supported services
that are needed locally, which is why I would be very happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss the specific issues she raises. It is important that we work to establish the best funding model for supported housing.

Jess Phillips: First, I very much welcome the Government’s announcement to exempt specialist providers such as women’s refuges from changes to housing benefit. I know that the Government have a plan to help refuges and women’s refuges remain sustainable in the future, so I would like to hear what they plan to do for all other sorts of supported living accommodation for elderly people, people with learning difficulties and some of our ex-servicemen and women who, as I heard on the radio today, are having their services shut.

Caroline Nokes: I commend the hon. Lady for the sterling work she has done on refuges. What we know is that there is a massive variety of types of providers of supported housing, and it is critical that in the consultation process we find a solution that works for all of them.

Mr Sharma: How many supported housing starts have been stalled by the Secretary of State’s decision to delay a framework for supported housing?

Caroline Nokes: What is critical is that we get the solution right, which is why we are bringing forward the consultation and why we deferred the local housing allowance cap for supported housing until 2019-20.

Pensions: Long-serving Employees

15. Stephen Mc Elfine (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): What steps the Government are taking to help protect the pensions of long-serving employees.[906591]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Pensions (Richard Harrington): We have a well-established regime of checks and balances in place, for example the Pension Protection Fund and the Pensions Regulator. The Government keep this framework for pensions under constant review, and amend it when evidence demonstrates that such change is needed.

Stephen Mc Elfine: As I have stated previously, one of the welcome provisions in the Pensions Act 2014 was the raising of the Pension Protection Fund cap. Will my hon. Friend update the House on when that clause might be implemented, because two years on it has still not been put in place and pensioners in my constituency are suffering the consequences?

Richard Harrington: Let me first acknowledge the work that my hon. Friend has done to ensure that the long service cap was established. Pensions legislation is, as he knows, a very complex and technical area, and it is important that the secondary legislation for the cap operates as it was intended in all circumstances. This process can take time. However, I can assure him that this has been a priority for me from my first day in office. As I recently announced, I intend the long service cap for the PPF to come into force in April 2017.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): My own personal occupational pension scheme has just been reduced. It is not a problem for me personally with my generous parliamentary salary, but it is symptomatic of the problems facing occupational pension schemes and pensioners. Is not the real long-term solution to establish a compulsory universal state earnings-related scheme for all, with defined contributions and defined benefits?

Richard Harrington: As the hon. Gentleman knows, this was looked into by the Turner review and by many people and institutions since. Automatic enrolment is in place, which is a great step forward. Millions of people have now enrolled. I hope that, as time evolves, this will become the main form of pension for people other than the new state pension.

Benefit Appeals

17. Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): What proportion of (a) personal independence payment and (b) employment support allowance applications are awarded on appeal to a tribunal.[906593]

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt): For PIP, it is 3%; and for ESA, it is 14%.

Mr Hollobone: What main reasons has the Minister identified for why valid claims are ending up in the tribunal, and what changes to procedures can she suggest so that the Department awards these valid applications either in the first place or on reconsideration?

Penny Mordaunt: As I stated previously, we have been doing some work in this area. One of the key things that will help is ensuring that we have more flexibility early on in the process so that where cases are complex, the evidence is submitted. There is also huge scope for using the information that the Government, and different parts of the Government, have to cut down on the bureaucracy altogether. The Green Paper will look at all these issues.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My constituent receives ESA and has been seeking a review of her action plan by Ingeus, but neither Ingeus nor the DWP will take responsibility for reviewing it, despite the Secretary of State having a statutory obligation to do so. Will the Secretary of State investigate my constituent’s case?

Penny Mordaunt: I am sorry to hear that. If the hon. Lady writes to me, I shall look into it further.

Topical Questions

T1. [906602] John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Damian Green): I am pleased to update the House on our continued efforts to support disabled people to access essential services and support more easily. Last month we launched a new digital service for Access to Work, so people can now apply online, making the application...
Statistics published today show that already around 500 people a week are now making claims online, on average taking less than 20 minutes to complete a claim—a huge improvement from the delays and difficulties many experienced with the old system.

**John Nicolson:** I am glad that the Secretary of State feels so complacent. Only weeks ago the House was assured that tax credit cases would be expedited as a matter of urgency, but claimants are still waiting for weeks without their cases being resolved. The Secretary of State’s Department is responsible for dealing with child poverty. Will he tell us what he will do to push the system forward and make it work?

**Damian Green:** I am happy to assure the hon. Gentleman that I absolutely take the point that the system is not perfect, and, one suspects, will never be perfect, but, as I have said, we are taking steps to improve it in every area. The hon. Gentleman mentioned child poverty. As I have said before, there are many thousand fewer children in poverty than there were in 2010. Overall, there are 300,000 fewer people in poverty than there were then, and there are 100,000 fewer working-age adults in poverty. I hope the whole House agrees that work is the best route out of poverty, and that using the benefits system to try to help people into work is the best thing that we can do for them in the long term.

**T3. [906604] Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con):** Will my hon. Friend join me in celebrating the extremely low rate of jobseeker’s allowance claimants in my constituency, which is currently half the rate in the north-east region as a whole? It is due drop even further with the imminent arrival of a new Premier Inn hotel in Berwick, which will go some way towards countering the otherwise largely seasonal nature of tourism employment locally.

**The Minister for Employment (Damian Hinds):** I welcome both those pieces of news, and the employment that will be brought to my hon. Friend’s constituency. What she has said about the opening of the hotel reflects a national trend. We know from surveys that the demand for staff in the hospitality industry continues to be strong, and it is one of the factors that are helping us to achieve a record level of employment.

**Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab):** According to the International Monetary Fund, a series of forecasts has shown that the vote to leave the European Union will lead to low global growth and rock-bottom interest rates for years to come, and that as a result, despite the saving of trillions of pounds, workers who are due to retire in the next few years will not even have their basic needs met. Today, as the deputy Governor of the Bank of England defends the Bank’s approach to the economy to Members of Parliament and outlines his concerns about pensions, will the Secretary of State tell us what the Government are going to do to shore up the pensions of people who have done the right thing and earned their retirement?

**Damian Green:** The best thing that the Government can do—and, of course, it is what we are doing and will continue to do—is ensure that our underlying economy is strong and continues to create jobs as it has over the past six years, because, as we know, that is the best way to preserve and enhance both the state and the private pensions systems in the future.

**T5. [906609] Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con):** Given that only 15% of people with autism are in full-time employment, I was pleased earlier this year to join the Department’s Paul Maynard taskforce, which made 14 recommendations for improving access to apprenticeships for people with learning disabilities, including autism. What progress has been made with the implementation of those recommendations?

**The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Penny Mordaunt):** I pay tribute to the taskforce, and also to my right hon. Friend’s work with the all-party parliamentary group on autism. We have introduced a number of measures. We have a contract with Autism Alliance UK, and I am grateful to the alliance for training more than 1,000 of our own staff. We will introduce further measures, and the Green Paper will focus strongly on autism, outlining not just our ambitions but what we intend to do now.

**Mr Speaker:** I call Mr Virenda Sharma.

Where is the fellow? He was here a moment ago, and now he has beetled out of the Chamber. All this beetling out of the Chamber is a very unhealthy phenomenon now he has beetled out of the Chamber. All this beetling but what we intend to do now.

**Caroline Flint (Don Valley) (Lab):** It has been brought to the attention of the Public Accounts Committee that universal credit is paid per calendar month, which, as has been pointed out by the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers, affects those receiving four-weekly pay very badly. I know that, since our evidence inquiry, the Minister’s officials have met representatives of the union to discuss their concerns. May I ask the appropriate Minister to follow the matter up? It is an anomaly that affects a great many retail workers who are ending up without their universal credit being paid.

**Damian Hinds:** The right hon. Lady identifies the issue around four-weekly versus two-weekly versus monthly cycles of pay. As she mentions, it came up at the Select Committee. I know that Lord Freud is considering what the implications are and is continuing his discussions.

**T8. [906609] Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con):** I am sure that my hon. Friend will join me in welcoming the news that there are now more women in work, including in my constituency, than ever before. Furthermore, does he agree that this Government’s childcare offer, which ensures that universal credit covers 85% of childcare costs for claimants, is critical in helping families and in helping mothers back into work?

**Damian Hinds:** Indeed, I welcome the news of the record levels of female employment. My hon. Friend is right that enhancements in childcare are an important part of this. Within that, the extension in universal credit support from 70% to 85% of costs is important, coupled with the fact that it applies at lower levels of hours, which will enable some mums to get back into the workplace sooner than might otherwise be the case.
T6. [906607] Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Last week, my constituent, Mrs Roberts, told me that, during the course of migrating her disability living allowance claim to the personal independence payment, she was asked to read out her bank details over the phone. That presented a problem to her because she is blind. For other Government services, she is able to use an adapted computer. Will the Secretary of State agree to review urgently that element of the PIP assessment process so that reasonable adjustments can be made for all those with visual impairments?

Damian Hinds: My hon. Friend is right to identify the importance of helping ex-offenders into work. We know that, if they get into work, they are much less likely to reoffend. The See Potential campaign is important in that regard. Many employers have signed up to that and I commend them for doing so. I and the Under-Secretary of State for Justice, my hon. Friend the Member for East Surrey (Mr Gyimah), the Minister with responsibility for prisons, are in regular contact about how we can further improve our offer for ex-offenders and we will continue to work on that.

Penny Mordaunt: As I mentioned earlier, we have identified a number of things through the PIP continual improvement process. Some recurring trends have been down to straightforward things—for example, the failure of computer systems to integrate. However, we have the standards to which she has alluded. Where that is not happening, I would be grateful if hon. Members would write to me, I will ensure that we look at that matter carefully.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I hope that Ministers were as concerned as I was that not one of the offenders leaving prison earlier this month who were mentioned in the chief inspector of probation report found work? Will Ministers commit to raise that issue with all employers they meet, not least in the public sector, where our record is still not good enough, so that we can all be safer?

T7. [906608] Corri Wilson (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): Given the complaints about the conduct of assessors during the PIP assessment process, a failing in the absence of a recording and recordings made on mobile phones, tablets and computers not being accepted, what action is the Minister taking to ensure that recordings are taken as a matter of course and that claimants are not required to provide their own specialist equipment?

Penny Mordaunt: This is a very important issue. The Green Paper will look at it, but outside that, if we are really serious about closing the disability employment gap, we have to look at job creation and create opportunities for everyone, including those who may have particular needs, to do meaningful activity, to work and to have flexibility. Therefore, we are looking at those things.

Damian Green: Given that delays in assessment have left my constituents waiting—in the case of Sandra Maley, more than two years—for their employment and support allowance payments, will the Secretary of State make a commitment to backdate payments to the point of application, so that my constituents suffering real hardship get the financial support to which they are entitled?

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that with more powers over health and social care being devolved to local government, it makes sense to at least consider transferring the administration and responsibility for attendance allowance to them too?

Penny Mordaunt: This was part of the consultation on business rate retention and is being considered at the moment.

T9. [906610] Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Last week, my constituent, Mrs Roberts, told me that any doubts they have about employing people with disabilities, because it seems that getting people to give someone a go is the best way to show that any doubts they have about employing people with a disability are unfounded?

Damian Green: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for bringing up that individual case. Obviously, if he wants to send details, I will look at them. Clearly, each case has to be assessed on its merits, so I cannot give any blanket commitments at the Dispatch Box, but I will certainly look at the individual case.

Bridget Phillipson (Houghton and Sunderland South) (Lab): As the Secretary of State will know, the north-east still has the highest unemployment rate in the UK, with far too many people desperate to find secure work. Is this what the Government mean by a northern powerhouse, or have Ministers abandoned the idea altogether?

Justin Tomlinson (North Swindon) (Con): I know the Minister is passionate about sports opportunities for disabled people, especially with today’s homecoming parade for our Paralympian champions. However, Mencap today highlighted that only nine out of 252 Paralympic events are open to those with a learning disability. Will the Minister meet Mencap urgently to look at how this can be addressed?

Penny Mordaunt: It is absolutely vital that we ensure that, whether in school or later in life, people with disabilities can participate in sporting activities. That is good not just for physical health, but for mental wellbeing. I would be very happy to meet Mencap.
Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Youth unemployment in Wolverhampton remains stubbornly high despite recent progress. City of Wolverhampton Council is running an excellent project to help young people back into work, which is part-funded by the European Union. The Secretary of State and I campaigned to remain in the EU. Can he guarantee that such projects will be funded by the Government once we leave?

Damian Hinds: As the hon. Lady knows, a statement has been made about the European social fund and what happens to projects at different stages. I commend what is happening in her constituency and welcome the fact that in Wolverhampton North East youth unemployment has fallen by 54% since 2010.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I do not know whether it is just in my area, but at every weekly surgery I will have one person who has been refused PIP who is clearly entitled to it. I had a lady this week with multiple sclerosis; she is clearly entitled to it and will get it when she goes to the independent tribunal, but why do such people have to wait until then? Surely this can be corrected at an earlier stage.

Penny Mordaunt: We now have mandatory reconsideration, but I understand my hon. Friend’s frustration. The key to this is to ensure that we get the decision right in the first instance. We are looking very closely at those cases that have gone to appeal and been overturned to see why the right decision was not taken earlier in the process. I have mentioned some of the things we are going to do and the Green Paper will have more, but I absolutely hear my hon. Friend.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Dozens of Women Against State Pension Inequality petitions with thousands of signatures have been presented already across the UK, with more on the Order Paper today and tomorrow. The Secretary of State needs to accept that these women are not going anywhere and a solution is needed. Does the Minister agree that if there is no money for pensions, there is no money for weapons of mass destruction?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Pensions (Richard Harrington): The Government have already made a concession to the WASPI women. The state pension is very much part of public expenditure and always will be, and it is absolutely not the case that defence expenditure and that on the state pension can be compared.

Shabana Mahmood (Birmingham, Ladywood) (Lab): The most recent Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs figures show that my constituency now has the highest level of child poverty in the country, and we know that two thirds of children living in poverty live in working households. For my constituents this is not a country that works for everyone. Will the Secretary of State now agree that he must come to this House and reverse the cuts to universal credit so that my constituents and others are supported, rather than penalised for this Government’s choices?

Damian Green: Since September, the Scottish Government have had the power to pay benefits in many new areas; they can create new benefits and top up reserved benefits. The days when this Chamber was just a relaxing place where SNP Members could come to whinge are over. They now control a Government who have the power to do something about this and put their money where their mouth is.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but we must now move on.
3.35 pm

Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab) (Urgent Question): To ask the Home Secretary to make a statement on the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): I would like to make a statement on the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse. I know that the whole House will agree with me when I say that the work of the inquiry is absolutely vital. Victims and survivors must have justice, and we must learn the lessons of the past. The inquiry’s remit is to examine whether institutions in England and Wales have failed to protect children from sexual abuse. It is an independent body, established under the Inquiries Act 2005. The Home Office is the sponsor Department, and I am responsible for the terms of reference, appointing the chair and panel members, and providing funding. Last year, the inquiry had a budget of £17.9 million and underspent by over £3 million. The appointment of staff and the day-to-day running are matters for the chair.

The inquiry has a significant budget, and the Home Office is the sponsor Department. The inquiry has a significant budget, and the Home Office is responsible for ensuring that it is independent. The Home Secretary is here because she has been asked to be here, not because she asked to be here. That is quite an important distinction, which we ought to respect in the language that we use.

Lisa Nandy: The Home Secretary is right to say that the inquiry is of profound significance not only to survivors, but the whole country. She is right to remind us that it is independent, but these events and problems that have beset it since it started also raise fundamental questions of accountability.

The Home Secretary referred to the evidence that she gave to the Home Affairs Committee on 7 September, in which she said that “all the information” she had was that Justice Goddard had quit because she was a “long way from home” and “too lonely”. The Home Secretary said that she was relying on a letter. Why did she not ask Justice Goddard why she had quit the inquiry? We have since learned that senior officials in the Department were aware on 29 July—before the resignation—of concerns about Justice Goddard’s conduct. It is also alleged that Liz Sanderson, an adviser to the Home Secretary’s predecessor, who is now Prime Minister, and Mark Sedwill, the permanent secretary, knew about the concerns long before then. Will the Home Secretary clarify whether that is the case?

On what date did the Home Office become aware of the problems? On which exact date during the 16 months that the chair was in post did the Home Secretary or her predecessor become aware of the problems? Who made them aware of those problems? Given that 38 Home Office staff are seconded to the inquiry, how could the Home Secretary have been unaware of the concerns as late as 7 September? Can she tell us why, given that the Home Office knew of serious questions about the behaviour and leadership of the inquiry, she went on to authorise a pay-off to Justice Goddard worth £80,000?

Will the Home Secretary confirm that she is the only person who can terminate the chair’s contract and that misconduct is grounds for dismissal under that contract? If so, why was that not acted upon? Has she or the Prime Minister intervened to request that Justice Goddard appears before the Home Affairs Committee? If not, will they do so urgently? Can she explain the circumstances surrounding the departure of the lead counsel, Ben Emmerson, QC? Has any compensation been paid to him or the four other senior lawyers who have quit the inquiry? Will the Home Secretary assure survivors about how the inquiry will proceed?

Finally, this inquiry was established to shine a spotlight on institutions characterised by a culture of secrecy, denial and cover-up in which child abusers were able to operate in plain sight without challenge or consequence. It is a tragedy that the inquiry has been dogged by allegations of a similar nature, with which child abuse victims will be far too familiar. If the inquiry is to proceed with confidence, the questions must be answered.

Mr Speaker: It is very cheeky for an hon. Member to use the word “finally” in what I might call the Hughes sense—a reference to the former Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark, who was wont to follow that word with several further sentences.
Amber Rudd: I will endeavour to answer the hon. Lady’s questions as fully as possible. She initially asked about my comments to the Home Affairs Committee on why Dame Lowell Goddard had left, so I want to quote from Dame Lowell’s letter, in which she says: “It was never easy operating in an environment in which I had no familiar networks and there were times when it seemed a very lonely mission.”

It was with reference to that note that I gave my answer to the Committee.

The hon. Lady had several queries about staffing. The independence of the inquiry can be maintained only by it being absolutely clear that such matters are for the chair. It is not for the Home Office to control staffing; it is for the chair to appoint members of staff, and the chair has the operational independence to do so.

The hon. Lady also inquired about whether I had asked Dame Lowell Goddard to appear before the Home Affairs Committee. I have indeed passed on that specific request.

My Department has followed the correct formal procedure at all times and will continue to do so in order to ensure that there is true accountability regarding transparency, which is so important. The fact that the inquiry is independent is absolutely essential to garnering the support that is needed from the expert panel, which is part of the inquiry, and from victims and survivors.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): May I support the Home Secretary in emphasising the importance of this inquiry carrying on its important work? Will she also acknowledge that Alexis Jay and other panel members, as well as her own permanent secretary, will be appearing before the Home Affairs Committee tomorrow? Does the Home Secretary agree that it would be very helpful if Lowell Goddard agreed to appear in person in front of us? Finally, while respecting the independence of such an inquiry, there is a duty for the Home Secretary and the Home Affairs Committee, as a scrutinising body, to make sure that it is fit for purpose and is spending public money wisely. Does she agree that it is not sufficient for a chairman to be entirely self-regulating if things are going wrong, as she appears to be suggesting?

Amber Rudd: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. He is right to say that we need to point out that the permanent secretary is appearing before the Home Affairs Committee tomorrow, as is the new chair, Alexis Jay. I am sure she will get the confidence she deserves from the Select Committee and from other parties who have listened to her.

My hon. Friend is right that the operational independence of the chair is also dependent on support from the expert panel, and when my permanent secretary was approached by the secretary of the independent inquiry about concerns on 29 July, he rightly referred the secretary to ask the expert panel to take this up with the chair. The relationship between the chair and the expert panel is central to this, and so in that way the chair would not be able to act independently, because she needs the support of the expert panel.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): The Government have now on their fourth chair of the inquiry into child sexual abuse. No inquiry in modern times has been mired in such chaos. At the very least, this suggests a certain incompetence, both in setting the terms and in selecting the personnel to lead the inquiry. This is bad for policy and for the Home Office but, above all, it is a terrible situation for the survivors of child sexual abuse, who have put so much hope and trust in the successful conclusion of this inquiry.

The latest scandal is the departure of Dame Justice Lowell Goddard, amid allegations of high-handedness and racist remarks. The Home Secretary said—this has been repeated—when she appeared before the Home Affairs Committee on 7 September that “all the information” she had was that Lowell Goddard had quit because she was “a long way from home” and “too lonely”. She says that she was reliant on Justice Goddard’s letter, but why did she not ask—why did she not get a formal response from her as to why she was going? In the absence of any attempt to get formal information, other than the letter, the Home Secretary finds herself in a position where she will have to defend herself against accusations of misleading the Committee. It is clear from the statements of the victims and their families that they believe there will be no change to the remit of the inquiry and no reduction in its scope. Who, on behalf of the inquiry and the Home Office, has communicated that to them? Was this Home Office policy at the time? Has it changed, and why has it changed? Will any attempts be made to scale back the inquiry? Does the Secretary of State agree that if that were to happen—scaling back an inquiry on which so many hopes rest among individuals who have spent a lifetime in pain and misery because of early abuse—it would be to make the survivors pay for the Government’s failure in managing this inquiry?

Amber Rudd: The hon. Lady also inquired about whether I had been repeated—when she appeared before the Home Affairs Committee on 7 September that “all the information” she had was that Lowell Goddard had quit because she was “a long way from home” and “too lonely”. She says that she was reliant on Justice Goddard’s letter, but why did she not ask—why did she not get a formal response from her as to why she was going? In the absence of any attempt to get formal information, other than the letter, the Home Secretary finds herself in a position where she will have to defend herself against accusations of misleading the Committee. It is clear from the statements of the victims and their families that they believe there will be no change to the remit of the inquiry and no reduction in its scope. Who, on behalf of the inquiry and the Home Office, has communicated that to them? Was this Home Office policy at the time? Has it changed, and why has it changed? Will any attempts be made to scale back the inquiry? Does the Secretary of State agree that if that were to happen—scaling back an inquiry on which so many hopes rest among individuals who have spent a lifetime in pain and misery because of early abuse—it would be to make the survivors pay for the Government’s failure in managing this inquiry?

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): Having worked for many years with my constituent Tom Perry, who works with Mandate Now and the Survivors Trust, which seek to require all staff working in regulated activities to report concerns about a child’s welfare to the local authority, I know how important this inquiry is. Does the Home Secretary agree that the inquiry is indeed a vital tool for uncovering where children and young people have been failed by Government and institutions in the past, and will she undertake again to look at mandatory reporting?
Amber Rudd: My right hon. Friend raises a personal case, and it is important for us all to bear such cases in mind when we think about the scale of this inquiry and people bringing forward their stories. There are always these independent stories that remind us how important it is to get truth and justice for these people, and to learn from those stories so that we can ensure that institutions make improvements. Of course I will look at what she has suggested.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Home Secretary is right to talk about the independence of the inquiry. We all want Professor Jay to be able to make a success of such an important inquiry now, but there is continued concern because this is the fourth chair and the second legal team, and because of the lack of transparency about the problems there seems to have been from both the inquiry and the Home Office. Is the Home Secretary satisfied that the transparency arrangements for the inquiry are strong enough and that there will now be enough accountability for the progress of the inquiry?

Amber Rudd: I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that there is no “paralysis”—he particularly used that word. The inquiry is at full tilt and working at full speed under Alexis Jay, and it will continue to do so.

The hon. Gentleman asks about the dates. I believe that he set them out very clearly in my response to the urgent question: I know about this on 29 July, and that was one week before Dame Lowell Goddard resigned. I point out that the allegations to which he refers are absolutely denied by Dame Justice Goddard, so it would not be appropriate for me to refer to them or to speculate on them while there may indeed be legal action following them.
Amber Rudd: The right hon. Lady has come to the crux of the matter—have we got the right balance of independence and transparency? I recognise that that is something that I need to reassure people about and hopefully demonstrate. One of the reasons for being here today is to make that point. I will watch carefully to make sure that we continue to get the right balance, providing the independence that is necessary while being as transparent as possible.

Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con): I think it is worth reiterating the importance of independence, and I hope my right hon. Friend agrees with me. I hope she will reinforce to the House that protecting the strictly independent nature of the inquiry is incredibly important. Will she continue to give that reassurance?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is right. Ensuring that people have confidence in the inquiry is also about maintaining its independence.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Instead of making this all about lawyers, judges and even Ministers, may we bring the focus back to where it really belongs—on the needs, wishes and interests of the victims? Will the Home Secretary give us an assurance that as the inquiry goes forward, any request for access from victims’ representatives to her or to the inquiry will be met, that the victims’ voice will be heard in Government, and that any victim who is pursuing justice by another route will not find that route prejudiced by any shortcomings in the inquiry?

Amber Rudd: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for making that important point. The inquiry is, of course, about the victims and survivors. When I wanted to make inquiries about appointing a new chair, I did, of course, consult the victims and survivors consultative panel to ensure that it was supportive, which indeed it was. The right hon. Gentleman is right—we must make sure that the victims and survivors are always at the centre of our words and our deeds.

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): As well as it being vital that this important inquiry is strictly independent, as hon. Members have emphasised, does my right hon. Friend agree that it is vital that we let it do its work and await its report, rather than anyone seeking in any way to pre-empt its findings?

Amber Rudd: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We may have discussions, urgent questions and statements on issues of staffing, but the fact is that the inquiry is going ahead, it is taking evidence and the chair is working hard to make sure she delivers as soon as possible.

John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): It is not taking evidence from everyone yet. I am the appointed representative of some of the survivors from my constituency, and my office is assisting others with statements, and none of that has gone forward yet. Is there not a danger that this is going to become another lawyers bun fest, with judges and barristers resigning, and with large numbers of lawyers not just queueing up, but at the front of the queue, to make large amounts of money not only representing people to the inquiry, but, simultaneously, taking legal civil action against the authorities? What are the Government going to do to ensure that the survivors are at the heart of this rather than the lawyers?

Amber Rudd: We always make sure that survivors are at the heart of this. There is, nevertheless, a legal role to be played, and there are expenses associated with an inquiry, but there is no blanket cheque. One role with which the Home Office does have constant engagement is making sure that the budgets are carefully set and challenged each year so that the proper costs are associated with this.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I am sure the inquiry is moving forward in the right way, but I hope we are not being deflected from dealing with child abuse that is going on at the moment, especially of children who are trafficked into this country. One thing we could do urgently is move the protection of children who are trafficked from local government to national Government and the Home Office. If the Home Secretary would be willing to look into that, it would improve things enormously.

Amber Rudd: I know of my hon. Friend’s action and I do not share the hon. Gentleman’s view about this being a political inquiry of any sort. I think it is essential, important and valued by everybody—in this House certainly, and in the nation generally. We have a Select Committee that will continue to make its inquiries. As I said earlier, Alexis Jay has indicated that she hopes to conclude the inquiry by the end of 2020.

Byron Davies (Gower) (Con): Given that we are where we are now with the resignation of Dame Justice Goddard, does my right hon. Friend agree with Professor Jay when she says that the inquiry is “open for business”? Does she agree that it can now go forward with its vital work with confidence to demonstrate its accountability?

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Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Will the Home Secretary accept that there are some serious questions to be asked about the due diligence that was undertaken in the appointment of Justice Goddard in the first place? Has she had an opportunity to discuss with her predecessor what steps she took to ensure Justice Goddard was up for the job? Can she confirm for me exactly what date she expects the interim report, exactly what date she expects the final report and what the total cost of the inquiry will be?

Amber Rudd: We have asked for the interim report by the end of this financial year, so we would expect it in March or April next year. I have already indicated that we hope that the final report will be completed by the end of 2020, but I cannot be prescriptive about that; that is for the chair to decide, but that is the indication she has given.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Can the Home Secretary reassure my constituents that the work of this important inquiry was not stopped each time a chairman stood down? Can she reassure the House that there is a robust system of deputy chairs in place?

Amber Rudd: Considerable work has already been done over the past 16 months. The new chair is aware of the need to get confidence back and to pick up activity with all due urgency. I assure my hon. Friend that she is taking that obligation, with the momentum that she has now picked up, very seriously.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): When I asked the former Prime Minister an oral question about the loss of survivor testimonies that were submitted through the inquiry website, he said that he would write to me. What he meant was that he would print a press release from the inquiry website and forward it on. This patronising and irresponsible approach would print a press release from the inquiry website and wanting to make the changes to institutions that are necessary as we move forward.

Amber Rudd: I respectfully ask the hon. Lady to engage with the chair in order to get an answer. I urge the hon. Lady’s constituents to have a better view on the timeframe for those investigations?

Amber Rudd: I completely understand the need for the hon. Lady’s constituents to have a better view on the potential timing of the progress of this inquiry. We now have a chair who has said that she is going to move with momentum and pace, so I would expect them to hear from her soon. I am sorry to have to repeat this, but it is for the inquiry to decide how to proceed. I urge the hon. Lady to engage with the chair in order to get an answer.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): Following the question by my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough (Mr Bone), with the movement of people and the vulnerability of children a matter of concern to all of us in this House, what steps are the Government taking with other nations to tackle the global challenge of child sexual abuse in order to learn from that and better inform the inquiry?

Amber Rudd: Internationally, we are viewed as being ahead of other countries in trying to address this. We have a number of initiatives online to make sure that we share good practice and engage with other countries. The Modern Slavery Act 2015 is one way of making sure that less abuse takes place. Again, we are an international leader in that area.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I have known far too many people in my life who have been abused. A colleague at theological college used to cry herself to sleep every single night because of the abuse she had suffered as a child. A young member of the congregation where I was a curate self-harmed for months on end because of the abuse that she had suffered from one of her teachers. Another ordinand was abused by the Bishop here at the start of these exchanges in the Chamber. [Interruption.] If she was, that is fine. I had been advised that she was not, but her word is good enough. If she says she was, that is good enough for me. Was she here at the start of the exchanges on this matter?

Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con) indicated assent.

Mr Speaker: Very good.
of Gloucester—a man in power and authority, and spiritual authority, over him. For all those people, and doubly for all the others we all know, the thing that matters more than anything else is getting to the truth, so that what they know in their heart is known by everybody else to have been the truth. I say very gently to the Home Secretary that if at any point she has a choice between letting everything out into the open and keeping some things back, she should always go for the former, not the latter.

Amber Rudd: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. It is incumbent on those of us who have anything to do with an inquiry about transparency and abuse to ensure that we are as transparent, accountable and frank with people as possible. I reassure him that I will always do that, but I would like to turn the emphasis back to the inquiry and the new chair so that we can make the progress that is so essential to his and all our constituents.

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): David Cameron was very fond of quoting Justice Brandeis’s dictum that sunlight is the best disinfectant. In the spirit of the comment of my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), does the Home Secretary agree that we need to get all the facts out in the open now? Will she allow, and in fact even encourage, former panel members to share their fears and concerns in public so that we can start with a completely clean sheet?

Amber Rudd: I would like to reassure the hon. Gentleman that the new chair takes that approach in terms of full transparency, but I do not want to mislead him by saying that the Home Office can do too much on that. We can be frank and open about every stage that we have been involved in, but it is for the inquiry to answer some of the detailed questions. I remind the House that Alexis Jay will be in front of the Home Affairs Committee tomorrow and hopefully will be able to answer some of the hon. Gentleman’s questions.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Diolch yn fawr iawn, Mr Speaker. When the Macur report was presented earlier this year, it contained hundreds of redactions, apparently to avoid prejudicing court actions, much to the dismay of victims in north Wales. What can the Home Secretary do to ensure that the report of the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse will have a minimal amount of redactions to help victims to obtain justice in the courts?

Amber Rudd: I can honestly say that I share the hon. Gentleman’s view that an inquiry about transparency and abuse to ensure that we are as transparent, accountable and frank with people as possible. I reassure him that I will always do that, but I would like to turn the emphasis back to the inquiry and the new chair so that we can make the progress that is so essential to his and all our constituents.

Michael Dugher (Barnsley East) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. Community pharmacies play a vital role in frontline healthcare. Nearly 12,000 communities in England provide free advice to patients, and more than 1 billion items were dispensed in the community last year—an increase of 50% on 2005. Reports in recent days, however, make it clear that the Government are determined to press ahead with massive cuts to community pharmacies in this and the next financial year.

Serious questions remain about the impact of those cuts. When will Ministers finally publish an impact assessment of the proposed plans? How many pharmacies will close? Which regions will lose the most? Will they be in clusters or not? What will be the rate of closure in urban, as opposed to rural, areas? Will the Minister confirm that only about one in 10 community pharmacies will be helped by the pharmacy access scheme?
Community pharmacies and the cuts to them are a complete false economy for the NHS. They can only add further pressures to our already overstretched A&E units and GP surgeries. What is the Minister’s assessment of the downstream costs to other parts of the NHS as a result of cuts to the community pharmacy budget, especially given the evidence from Pharmacy Voice that one in four people who would usually visit a pharmacy for advice would instead make a GP appointment if their local pharmacy was closed? In areas of higher deprivation, such as those in my constituency, the numbers are much higher.

We have seen massive opposition to these cuts, not just from pharmacies and voices on both sides of the House, but from the 2.2 million people who have signed the biggest petition in healthcare history. To conclude, Ministers have, to be frank, been all over the place. We have had mixed messages and false hope. The Government announced a pause to the cuts. Is not there now a compelling case for that pause to be made permanent?

David Mowat: The hon. Gentleman has not had any mixed messages from me. A pause was announced because the original consultation gave the intent to go ahead with this on 1 October. Given the change of Government and of Prime Minister, and given the new Chancellor and new Ministers, we took the opportunity to look at it again, to make sure that we get it right for patients, the NHS and the pharmacy sector itself, and that is what we intend to do.

The hon. Gentleman asked several questions, but first he said that the pharmacy sector is vital, and we agree with him. In some instances, however, there are as many as a dozen pharmacies within half a mile of each other. That is not an isolated occurrence. Each of those pharmacies receives £25,000 per annum, and it is our job to consider whether that money could be better spent in other parts of the NHS.

I am not in a position today to announce the final format or shape of the GP access scheme.

Michael Dugher: It is in the newspapers.

David Mowat: That is speculation. We continue to look at the most recent communication that we have received from the negotiating body of the PSNC. I remind the House that 60% to 65% of these pharmacies are owned by public companies or private equity. The fact of the matter is that the Government have a responsibility to make sure that that money is spent effectively, and that is what we are going to do.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman said that GP access needs to remain good. I confirm and repeat the point that I made earlier: 1,500 additional pharmacists will be recruited into the GP sector by 2020. That is a massive investment, and it will make a big difference.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): I should declare that Boots has its headquarters partly in my constituency and partly in Nottingham South. May I gently say to the Minister that there is great concern about the proposals? If there was ever a time to argue to increase the role of pharmacies, it is now. They perform a hugely powerful job in making sure that people do not, to be frank, bother their GPs and A&E with matters that are best dealt with by pharmacies because they are of a minor nature. The Minister makes a good point about clustering, but he has to get this right, because, if he damages pharmacies, there will be fewer of them, not just in poorer areas, but in remote rural areas. I urge the Government to take a hard good look at the issue, to make sure that this is the right approach as the pressures on the NHS increase.

David Mowat: I agree with my right hon. Friend. Boots makes a big contribution. It owns 1,724 pharmacies and is the biggest of the big four, which between them own 40% of all pharmacies. The Government’s position is that community pharmacists make a big contribution, but I repeat that the number of locations has increased by nearly 20% over the past decade, and each one gets £25,000 per annum just for being open and for being a pharmacy. One consequence is that we have seen a great deal of clustering, and 40% of pharmacies are within half a mile of three others. It is right that the Government look at that and make a judgment.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Michael Dugher) on securing this urgent question and on his exceptional campaigning on the issue. He is, no doubt, as disappointed as I am by some of the Minister’s replies.

Ministers appear to be intent on pushing ahead with the cuts that have been outlined, under which thousands of community pharmacies could close and patients could lose out on essential medical services. The Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee has described the Government’s proposals as “founded on ignorance” and warned that they will do “great damage”. The National Pharmacy Association says that the proposal is a “dangerous experiment” that “shows a complete disregard for the well-being of patients.”

Is that not an absolute indictment of the Government’s handling of this matter? The Minister has said that he will make an announcement shortly. Given the concern among Members from across the House, including Conservative Members, can he be more specific and tell us when he will give us a final decision? Will he also be negotiating a solution with the Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee? As the Minister knows, his predecessor talked of the potential for up to 3,000 pharmacies to close. Is that correct, in the Minister’s judgment? If not, can he tell us how many pharmacies he thinks will close, and how many of those will be in deprived areas?

Has the Minister had a chance to study the PwC report that describes the cash savings that community pharmacies bring to the NHS? What will be the financial impact on the NHS of more patients presenting themselves at A&E departments and GP surgeries because pharmacies have closed?

Is not the real reason why Ministers are pressing ahead with these cuts the complete mismanagement of NHS finances? Hospitals ended last year £2.45 billion in the red. We have had continual warnings from experts in the NHS, and over the weekend we learned from the Prime Minister that there is no more money for the NHS. The Secretary of State and the Prime Minister would be wrong to continue to ignore the advice of...
experts and pretend that everything is going to be okay. Unless the Government get a grip of the funding crisis facing the NHS, I fear that these cuts are just the start and that there is worse to come.

David Mowat: The Government spend more than the OECD average on the NHS. We spend more than the commitments made by the Labour party before the last election. That does not mean that we do not have a duty to spend that money as effectively as we can, however, and that is exactly what we intend to do. The money that may be saved by the measures we are consulting on will not go to the Treasury; it will be recycled back into NHS England. That is what NHS England wants to happen.

The hon. Gentleman mentions the excellent PwC report, which reaffirmed the value of community pharmacists to this country. PwC did not consider whether that same value could be still provided after some savings to the network. That is what we are looking at, and it is reasonable and responsible for the Government to do so. To say that that is not the case is simply incorrect.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned that the previous Minister talked about 3,000 pharmacies closing. We do not believe that the number will be anything like that big. In some areas, there are 10 or 11 pharmacies within half a mile of each other. [HON. MEMBERS: “Where?”] Leicester, Birmingham—we can talk more about this. It is quite possible that at the end of the review, some of those pharmacies will merge. If that happens, it will not mean that provision has been reduced. We do not believe that patient provision will suffer at all from the changes that we are considering.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): Community pharmacies play a very important role locally. Many of them have taken on useful services, such as eye tests and hearing tests, which definitely help to reduce the workload of GPs and of the NHS. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need a community pharmacy service that is better integrated with primary care and public health in line with NHS England’s five-year forward view?

David Mowat: It will not surprise the House to learn that I agree. Last Thursday night, I announced to over 1,000 pharmacists at their annual dinner that we are moving ahead with an urgent access scheme. From the beginning of December, all 111 calls for repeat prescriptions will go directly to pharmacists, not to the out-of-hours GP service. That is a tangible difference. We will do just the same with a minor ailments scheme, which will be commissioned right across the country so that, by April 2018, pharmacists will be paid—over and above any money that comes out of this settlement—for minor ailments work on things such as earache and so on. Those are exactly the sort of sensible steps that need to be taken to integrate pharmacy more closely into GP practice, and that is what we are doing.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): In Scotland, we already have a national minor ailments scheme within our community pharmacies, and it has had a huge impact. The Scottish Pharmacy Board estimated at the beginning of the project that 10% of the majority of GP visits and 5% of those making A&E visits could be seen in community pharmacies, so our investment has been in completely the opposite direction—in that of developing and strengthening such pharmacies.

On top of minor ailments, one of the big areas that has made a difference is in chronic disease management. For people on repeat prescriptions, the pharmacist requests their next prescription and has it ready, while for housebound people, they deliver it, as they do with blister packs.

The concern about these changes is that pharmacists are afraid it will be a case of cutting and then seeing who survives. If it is felt that there are too many pharmacies in one place, reducing their number needs to be done in a planned way, otherwise rural and deprived areas will end up without one. The Government should be making sure that community pharmacy is a real part of the NHS, not slashing it.

David Mowat: The hon. Lady made several points. On her last point, the access scheme on which we are currently consulting will protect pharmacies in rural and deprived areas. That is precisely the point of the scheme.

The hon. Lady’s first point was that Scotland has moved ahead on minor ailments, and we agree. I am on the record as saying that the pharmacy first scheme in Scotland is a good model. We want the profession to move away from just dispensing towards more value-added activities, such as services. That is precisely why we are putting into effect the minor ailments scheme that has been piloted. It will be implemented right across the UK—right across England, I should say—from April 2018.

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): In the lee of Watership down in my constituency, the village of Kingsclere was so alarmed by the Government’s plans that it raised a petition, possibly for the first time in its history, in support of its precious local pharmacy. Will the Minister confirm that, notwithstanding the consultation, the idea of protecting the dwindling number of rural pharmacies will come out at the end of the consultation as part of the access scheme?

David Mowat: Yes, I will confirm that. I am not in a position to announce today precisely how the access scheme will work, but I agree with my hon. Friend that a central part of it will be to make sure that everybody has a baseline distance to travel to get to a pharmacy and that everybody in the country will be able to access pharmacies within a reasonable time.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab/Co-op): NHS England’s five-year forward view stresses how important prevention is. Community pharmacies, which are anchored in the communities they serve, are vital in keeping people out of their GP surgeries and out of accident and emergency. The Minister talks about distance. What will the distance be? If I reflect on my own constituency, where the millionth signature of the petition was signed, my constituents really value each and every one of our community pharmacies. How many will he be cutting and how far does he expect people to travel to access one?

David Mowat: The hon. Lady mentions the five year forward view. If she reads the “General Practice Forward View”, she will see that central to it is the recruitment of 2,000 pharmacists into GP practices across the country by 2020. That is how we will embrace the pharmacy
profession and link it much more closely to GPs. I am not in a position, because we have not yet announced it, to discuss in detail today the final form of the access scheme and how it will work. Let us be very clear, however, that we do not expect people to have appreciably more of a journey to any pharmacy. We are talking about tens of metres, if any. The fact is that we will protect the pharmacies that need to be protected, so that everybody in the country has access within a reasonable time.

Alex Chalk (Cheltenham) (Con): Where sensible savings can be made, it is absolutely right that they should be explored, particularly if they are ploughed back into the health service. However, at a time when people in Cheltenham are turning increasingly to expert pharmacists for minor ailments support, can the Minister assure me that no changes will take place that undermine the welcome trend of going to pharmacies and not GPs?

David Mowat: As I said, that is our intention. Our belief is that the package in its entirety, which we will announce shortly, will actually enhance the role of pharmacies in providing services.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): How many community pharmacies will close as a result of these cuts?

David Mowat: We do not believe that any community pharmacies will necessarily close as a result of these cuts. That will depend on a number of factors.

Interruption. I will answer the question, which is fair. It depends on the margin they make from their pharmacy activities and on the additional margin they make from their retail activities. Given that 65% of all pharmacies are owned by public companies or private equity, it depends on the position those organisations take to their businesses. That is very hard to predict.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Will the Minister say a little more about how he sees these plans tying in with the agenda to better integrate health services? In Weldon in my constituency, GP and pharmacy services work very well together for local patients under the leadership of Dr Sumira. What best practice is out there, and what attention is the Government giving to it?

David Mowat: As I said, we are recruiting an additional 2,000 pharmacists into general practice by 2020. We will also link community pharmacists into the NHS 111 system in a way that has never been done in England, so that repeat prescriptions will go direct to pharmacists and not to out-of-hours GPs. By 2018, pharmacists will receive additional payment for looking after minor ailments.

Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party pharmacy group. In February this year, the Minister’s predecessor, the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), said there would be an impact assessment. In answer to a parliamentary question I tabled last week and the Minister answered, you also said that an impact assessment will be published, so that it would inform the final decision. Can the Minister tell us when that will be published? Will it be shared with representatives of community pharmacists?

Mr Speaker: I did not say anything about any impact assessment, but the Minister might have done for all I know. I have a feeling we are about to learn about it.

David Mowat: As my predecessor said, an impact assessment is being produced, and when these proposals are published in their entirety, that will be published at the same time.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): On Thursday, my local clinical commissioning group will announce whether it is going to press ahead with plans to downgrade A&E at the Huddersfield royal infirmary. Can the Minister not see that when our A&Es are under so much pressure, we need community pharmacies and GP surgeries to see patients on the front line? I appreciate what he says about clustering, but having seen the last bank branches close in my rural communities, I am sorry but I just do not have confidence in it.

David Mowat: All I can do is repeat the point that I made earlier. The Government completely agree that we need community pharmacies. The Government completely agree that they have a vital role to play in keeping patients away from GPs and, potentially, from A&E as well. That, however, is not the same as saying that the 11,800 pharmacies that we have at the moment are precisely the right number, or that the clustering is at precisely the right number as well. It is right for the Government to review this and to establish whether or not the £25,000 of NHS money that every pharmacy receives every year is money well spent.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): As we have heard, pharmacies have the potential to help the NHS become more efficient and community based. Community pharmacies are an integral part of the integrated care communities that the Success regime in Cumbria is promoting in order to take the pressure off our overstretched GPs and A&Es. We are really struggling to recruit doctors in Cumbria, so any loss of community pharmacies is a serious loss to our community. Can the Minister assure me that these wider health challenges are being taken into account?

David Mowat: Yes, I can assure the hon. Lady that we fully understand the issues in places such as Cumbria. To an extent, the access scheme is designed to make sure that large rural communities are properly protected. I can only repeat that we value the services that pharmacies provide and that we do not believe that there will be a substantial detriment to them as a result of a bit less clustering.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Given that as part of the Greater Manchester devolution deal, the Greater Manchester health and social care partnership has taken control of the £6 billion a year health budget, will Greater Manchester be treated differently? If not, is there not a case for the area to be allowed to determine for itself how best to make use of community pharmacies?
David Mowat: It is my belief that the devolution deal does not include pharmacists, so the responsibility for that sector remains in the Department of Health. The proposals that we shall shortly outline will therefore include proposals for pharmacies that will apply equally to Greater Manchester.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): The Minister may not know how many pharmacies are going to close, but Reena Barai, an award-winning community pharmacy in my constituency, estimates that one out of four pharmacies in the London borough of Sutton, which is 11 pharmacies in total, will be closed. These will predominantly be the independents—not Boots or Superdrug. Why does the Minister think that, for years, successive Governments have encouraged people to visit their pharmacies for certain conditions or tests, instead of GP surgeries and A&E? Was it not because it was better for their health and cheaper?

David Mowat: I can only repeat that we value and can see the value in community pharmacies. We do not believe that any reductions will be skewed towards the independent sector; nor do we believe that the sector’s position overrides our duty to look at clustering and to make sure that the money we spend in this sector—£2.8 billion—is spent most effectively and cannot be spent better on other parts of the NHS.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): As far as residents in the Kettering constituency are concerned, community pharmacies are a good thing. They relieve the pressure on the overburdened A&E at Kettering general hospital, and they are the only place to go when people cannot get an appointment at their local GP surgery. Can we please make more use of the community pharmacies that we have? If the Minister is right, and he suspects that not many community pharmacies will close, let me tell him in all candour that the process he is going through is completely cack-handed, because it is spreading fear among the community pharmacy community and that one out of four pharmacies in the London borough of Sutton, which is 11 pharmacies in total, will be closed. These will predominantly be the independents—not Boots or Superdrug. Why does the Minister think that, for years, successive Governments have encouraged people to visit their pharmacies for certain conditions or tests, instead of GP surgeries and A&E? Was it not because it was better for their health and cheaper?

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[David Mowat]

Gentleman mentioned healthy living pharmacies, and there are many examples. Part of our package will address the quality issue, which is one of the issues that the Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee asked us to consider.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): If the Minister wants to make the savings that he has talked about, he should work with the pharmacists and listen to what they have to say, because they have the ideas about how to make those savings. In my constituency, they talk to me about the potential for reducing repeat prescriptions, among other ideas. If he does that, he will play a role in looking after the heart of our community, which is what pharmacists are, and the heart of our NHS, which is also what they are. They also play an incredibly important role in every community in providing much needed footfall for other local businesses.

David Mowat: We have been talking to the Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee for 10 months. We have tried to incorporate, in the proposals that we are going to make, some of the points it has put to us. I can only again tell hon. Members, as I have already said to many others, that we value the contribution that the pharmacy sector can make. We wish to see that move over and above what it is now, in terms of dispensing, into more value-added services dealing with minor ailments, repeat prescriptions and long-term conditions. We want to do all those things, and we will.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): The Minister should tread with great care. I have visited many community pharmacies in my constituency, and in each and every one I saw lots of value-added activity—preparing medicine trays, delivering medicines or whatever—and a keenness to be involved in wider activities. There is a real danger that the Minister, in seeking savings, will cost the health service and communities more.

David Mowat: That would be a danger, had we not spent time over the past 10 months to try to get this right. We are confident and believe that we have done so.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): May I give some advice to the Minister? If he wants reforms—I think that the feeling on both sides of the House is that it is not the Boots in the centre of Chesterfield saying, “Don’t worry, they’re all hedge funds anyway.” It is absolutely ridiculous for a Minister to say that the centre-ground in British politics is changing. I feel that he has been sold a hospital pass on this one. He is responsible for a policy that lurches from the incoherent to the indefensible; that talks on the one hand about recruiting thousands of pharmacists and on the other about closing thousands of pharmacies. I am sorry, but we cannot keep loading, even on to the willing shoulders of the community pharmacies, more and more responsibility while we are draining away the financial lifeblood. Would the Minister care to become the most popular Minister on the high streets of our nation by saying that he is going to have another look at this nonsense?

David Mowat: I am always keen to be popular, but I am also keen to do the right thing. Nobody is talking about thousands of pharmacies closing and I do not believe that will happen, but we have talked about hiring 2,000 more pharmacies in the GP sector. That is true, but that is not incoherent; that is the right thing to do.

I just say this to the House: we all need to distinguish at times between the pharmacy profession, which we need and will nurture and help to grow and that can produce all these added values, and those people who own the pharmacy shops, 65% of which are public companies and private equity. The House should just reflect on that.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): It really is possible that the centre-ground in British politics is changing. Here we have a Conservative Minister coming to the Chamber to say, “I’m going to put hundreds of small firms out of business, but don’t worry; I’m going to get them all working for the Government.” It is absolutely bizarre, and the Minister is now trying to convince us by saying, “Don’t worry, they’re all hedge funds anyway.” We know it is not the Boots in the centre of Chesterfield that is going to be shutting; it is the community pharmacies
in each of our communities. So will the Minister at least give us the commitment that no community will be left without a pharmacy and that no doctors’ surgery will be allowed to have a pharmacy close on its doorstep?

David Mowat: I will give the hon. Gentleman the commitment that no community will be left without a pharmacy.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): I cannot impress strongly enough on the Minister the danger of these proposals. In my constituency the pressures on primary care are such that GP surgeries cannot recruit GPs and many practices are now not meeting Care Quality Commission standards because they are in old premises that are unsuitable. The thought that on top of that we would reduce the possibility for people to attend their local community pharmacy for simple healthcare needs is frightening. When the Minister publishes the impact assessment, will it provide any sort of reassurance and clarity that those complex primary care factors have been properly taken into account?

David Mowat: We have talked all afternoon about the need to protect access to GPs, and I repeat the point I made earlier: our proposals in the round should increase the degree to which pharmacists are linked into GP practices. The hon. Lady says that many practices are getting poor-quality assessments, but the fact is that over 80% of them are getting good-quality assessments, and we need that to continue.

The proposals we are setting out in the round are expected to make pharmacy access better than it is now, and the orientation of the pharmacy profession towards services and away from just dispensing should happen more quickly.

Points of Order

4.52 pm

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. At last week’s Prime Minister’s questions I raised some serious concerns about the practices of Virgin Care, based on direct experience as a former employee after my NHS service was transferred. Virgin Care has since issued a statement to the media stating that it has no record of my raising such concerns at the time. I am glad it brought that up as its failure to keep accurate records is one of my concerns. However, it is clear that it is implying dishonesty on my part, and I hope you will be able to advise me, Mr Speaker, on setting the record straight in that regard, because I want to make it clear that I did raise concerns on many occasions, including directly with the chief executive of Virgin Care, Mr Bart Johnson, in person at a meeting in the autumn of 2012. This was therefore known at the highest level within the company before it issued its statement suggesting the opposite.

In short, when the company suggested that I was being dishonest, it was trying to obscure the truth. Mr Speaker, may I ask you what resort Members have when the rich and powerful seek to intimidate or smear as we seek to do our duty in this House, and could such actions infringe the privileges of this Chamber?

Finally, can we reiterate that even the richest individuals and the wealthiest corporations should always stick to the truth about this House and its Members, however inconvenient that truth may be to their private interests?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving me notice of her point of order. Moreover, I understand her concern if the veracity of what she volunteered in good faith to the House has subsequently been called into question. Specifically, she asks me what recourse she has in these circumstances. In response, I make a number of points. First, if anybody was seeking to intimidate the hon. Lady as she goes about her parliamentary business, any such attempt has manifestly failed. Moreover, on the basis of my knowing her for the past 17 months, it seems entirely obvious that any such attempt would be doomed to fail. The sooner that point becomes clear to everyone outside the Chamber as well as within it, the better.

 Secondly, I think that the hon. Lady has found her own salvation in that she has taken this opportunity to raise a point of order with me on the Floor of the Chamber in which she has registered her discontent as well as putting the record straight in terms that appear to brook no contradiction. If she thinks that any further clarification or airing of the issue is required, various parliamentary avenues are open to her, and I do not doubt that she will pursue them with that combination of forensic precision and terrier-like tenacity for which she has become renowned in all parts of the House.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Let’s get Richard Branson in here.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) for his sedentary contribution to our proceedings, helpful as it was.
Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. This afternoon when I raised the issue of mitigation for the WASPI women during Work and Pensions questions, the Secretary of State indicated that the Scottish Government could deal with the issue by making additional payments to the WASPI women in Scotland. Perhaps unbeknown to us on these Benches, the Government are going to introduce legislation to give enhanced powers to the Scottish Parliament over pensions, but we have not heard about it. I have checked the legislation, and section 28 of the Scotland Act 2016 precludes us from making payments on reserved matters and specifically excludes pensions. I am sure that the Secretary of State unwittingly alleged that the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government had competence in that area, but I seek your guidance, Mr Speaker, on what could be done to bring him back to the House or to correct the record in some way.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is a dogged and assiduous Member of the House at all times, and I say to him that if the Secretary of State judges it necessary to return to the Chamber to clarify the position or seeks to insert a corrigendum in the Official Report, it is open to that Minister to do so. Whether that will happen remains to be seen. Meanwhile, the hon. Gentleman has put the record straight with crystal clarity, doubtless to his own satisfaction but perhaps more importantly to that of the constituents whom he seeks to represent.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. You will have heard the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Warrington South (David Mowat), saying a few moments ago that he hoped to make an announcement “shortly”. Can you use your good offices to ensure that when he has made his decision, he comes to the House to make a statement?

Mr Speaker: I thought that the hon. Gentleman was going to ask me that age-old question: “What does ‘shortly’ mean?” As we know, in Parliament the term “shortly” has a degree of elasticity associated with it. The Minister has heard the hon. Gentleman make his point. Before he became a Minister, he was an extremely active and effective parliamentarian who took pride in his responsibility to the House, and I am sure that he continues to do that. It is unimaginable that he would do anything other than come to the Chamber in those circumstances. In so far as the point needed to be underlined, however, it has been duly underlined by the notable campaigner from Leicester. I thank the Minister for his persistence and his courtesy in responding to the urgent question. I gently say to him that, now and again, he said that all he could do was to repeat his previous answer. He said it with great good humour and a degree of world-weary resignation. As I have often had reason to observe in the Chamber, repetition is not a novel phenomenon in the House of Commons. We will leave it there for now.

Savings (Government Contributions) Bill
Second Reading

4.59 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jane Ellison): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Let me start by reminding the House why the measures contained in the Bill are so important. We want people in this country to have all the tools at their disposal to save money in a way that works for them. We want to make it easier for everyone to build up the savings that they need, to meet their ambitions and to feel secure in their personal finances. We have already set to work to make that the case, putting an end to 17 million people having to pay tax on the interest they receive on their savings and making the biggest ever increase to the individual savings account allowance—to £20,000 from April next year—but we want to do more. The Bill will introduce two new schemes—the lifetime ISA and Help to Save—that will support more people as they save up for the future and provide them with new options to do so.

The lifetime ISA will provide a new option for young people who are looking to save for the long term. We want to make sure that they have a choice in how they save. For some, the pensions system alone is the way forward and we have done a lot to improve it, such as through automatic enrolment and initiatives such as the pensions dashboard. In our consultation last year on pension tax relief, we heard that the pensions system on its own is too inflexible for young people, so the lifetime ISA complements that system while giving people a new option that has been designed with flexibility in mind.

The lifetime ISA is a way of saving up to £4,000 a year. Someone can open an account between the ages of 18 and 40 and carry on saving up to the age of 50. On top of any interest they receive on their savings, they will earn a 25% tax-free bonus from the Government that is paid straight into their account.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Is the Minister at all concerned that this lifetime ISA will introduce an added complexity to the savings market, in particular for young people? Choosing whether to go for a pension or a lifetime ISA could be one of the most important financial decisions in a person’s life. Does she think that there is merit in increasing investment in independent advice and financial literacy so that young people are able to make informed financial decisions?

Jane Ellison: On the latter point, I will discuss advice a bit later on, but we are keen that people have access to good advice and good information. On the hon. Gentleman’s first point, this is about complementary products. It is not an either/or choice. The feedback from last year’s consultation was that many younger people did not want to make a binary choice between saving for later in life and saving for a house. This product is simple in its design but gives people that flexibility. As he says, it is important that people get advice, but the welcome that the proposal has received from consumer advocates indicates that people think that it is simple and flexible.

Jonathan Edwards: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way again. Their incomes mean that many young people are perhaps more hard-pressed than older
generations. They do not have the choice of investing in a pension and a lifetime ISA, so they will be deciding which one to go for. The Government need to address that worry with these proposals.

**Jane Ellison:** That interaction has been addressed in the Bill’s impact assessment. There was some concern about the Help to Buy ISA and the interaction with automatic enrolment, but we have seen no evidence of it driving a higher opt-out rate. In fact, the opt-out rate for automatic enrolment is lower than forecast—even on the forecast that was revised down. I note the hon. Gentleman’s concern but I think it has been addressed in the work that we have done.

What is attractive about the lifetime ISA is that people do not have to make an immediate decision about why they are saving this money, which goes back to the hon. Gentleman’s point about people not having to make that decision at an early stage when they cannot see what is ahead.

**Ian Blackford** (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Anyone saving into an auto-enrolment pension will get tax relief up front, but anyone who invests in a lifetime ISA will get the bonus, which I mentioned, but I go back to the point knowing that if they lose their job, they have barely saved to the point of accessing it, but the bonus comes at the two-year point, and I will come on to deal with that. This is based on research by groups and charities that work with people in the target market for the product, so there is a robust reassurance.

If someone is trying to put some of that hard-earned money aside in an effort to be more financially secure, we want to have the full support of their Government as they do so. That is why, through this Bill, we want to introduce the new Help to Save accounts by no later than April 2018. They will be open to any adult who is getting working tax credits or universal credit and working enough to earn the equivalent of at least 16 hours’ pay at the national living wage. That means about 3.5 million people are likely to be eligible.

As has been mentioned, people can save up to £50 a month for two years—we are talking about £1,200 in total—and the Government will give them a 50% bonus. If after those two years someone wants to do that again for the next two years, they will be able to do so. This way to save also offers complete flexibility. What people want to do with the money they have saved and with the Government bonus they have earned is completely up to them, and if they want to take their money out at any time, they can; there will not be any charge or penalty for doing so.

**Jonathan Edwards:** As usual, the House of Commons Library has produced a fantastic briefing on this Bill. In relation to this product, it mentions the conclusions of the Institute for Fiscal Studies, which says that only £70 million has been allocated by the Treasury to cover this new savings product in 2020-21, which is nowhere near enough to cover the Government contribution of 50% if everybody who is eligible takes up the product. Has the Treasury got its figures wrong?

**Jane Ellison:** We know that, historically—the hon. Gentleman is right on this—it has been difficult to target financial advice at some of those who are being targeted by this product. Indeed, not many financial products are being targeted at this particular group. However, I can reassure him that we will be doing everything we can—all hon. Members and credit unions have a role to play in this—to promote this product. If the take-up exceeds our expectations, we would be delighted, and we will certainly be working to that effect.

The scheme provides a real incentive for people on low incomes to keep saving what they can. That means that more and more families will have a rainy day fund, so that they can cope with unforeseen events that come their way. I am talking about the sort of events that
many of us as constituency Members recognise. They are the ones that drive people into our advice surgeries because something has happened. Research from the debt charity, StepChange, suggests that if families have £1,000 in the bank, they are almost half as likely to fall into problem debt, by which it means being in arrears with at least one bill or credit commitment. This is a savings vehicle that will really help people to build up a pot of money, which can be used for any purpose at all, but which is also there if needed for a rainy day.

In conclusion, this Bill is all about rewarding people who are trying to save for their future and providing them with new options to do so, and it encourages more people to follow their example. Whether we are talking about a young person who wants flexibility in how they save for their future, or someone on a low income who is trying hard to set aside a bit of money each month, we want to ensure that they have a helping hand along the way. Through these two new savings vehicles, that is exactly what the Government will provide. It therefore gives me great pleasure to commend this Bill to the House.

5.12 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as always, to debate opposite the Minister. I thank her for outlining the overarching principles of the Bill, which will introduce the new lifetime ISA and the Help to Save scheme. As we have heard, the lifetime ISA is a new savings product that will be available from April 2017 in which people under 40 may deposit up to £4,000 a year. The Government will then top up those savings by 25%. The savings accumulated in the LISA can be used as a deposit towards a first home, or can be accessed once a person is 60 to “complement”, to use the Government’s word, their retirement income. In the absence of using the product to save for a house deposit, it will be possible for a person to remove funds from the LISA before they are 60, but there will be a charge of 25%, effectively to remove the Government top-up from the funds withdrawn.

The Help to Save scheme will be available for people in receipt of either universal credit or working tax credit. If they receive working tax credit, they must have minimum weekly earnings equivalent to 16 hours at the so-called national living wage.

Mr Gareth Thomas: I was grateful to the Minister for her response to my question. Will my hon. Friend commit our Front-Bench team to probing the Government further on whether there should be a two-year qualifying period, or if the period should be reduced to 12 months? Similarly, will she commit our Front-Bench team to exploring in Committee whether credit unions can be allowed to take part alongside National Savings and Investments? NS&I already offers national coverage, so there is no reason why credit unions should be excluded.

Rebecca Long Bailey: My hon. Friend makes important points and we would support him in pushing the Government to respond to those questions. I will highlight some of the concerns of our Front-Bench team about the Help to Save scheme in particular. Credit unions are vital for the roll-out of any savings scheme that targets the most deprived communities.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The hon. Lady helpfully outlined the circumstances in which the lifetime ISA kicks in. Does she welcome that ISA to enable young people to save, given that half of present ISA holders are over 55?

Rebecca Long Bailey: I welcome the Government’s sentiment of encouraging people to save. If I may make a little progress, the hon. and learned Lady will get a fuller response in due course.

The Opposition have serious concerns about both policies under the Bill and a number of questions, with which I hope the Minister can assist. The Labour party warmly supports the Government’s principal aim of encouraging saving. Many working people in Britain are not saving enough or not saving at all, and that is storing up a multitude of problems not just for their personal finances, but for the public purse. The helpful House of Commons Library briefing states that 28% of people say that they have no savings at all and that 38% would struggle to pay an emergency expense of more than £500. In addition, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation surveys on poverty and social exclusion consistently find that between a quarter and a third of households say that they are unable to make regular savings. In the most recent survey, which was conducted in 2012, 32% of households gave that answer.

It is therefore right for the Government to examine methods and structures that will encourage saving, but I am sure that the Minister agrees that they must also address the root causes of this low saving trend. Will she examine carefully the reasons why many people do not save at all? Is it because they are splashing out on fancy cars and extravagant purchases, or is it because wages are too low and the cost of living is too high to get through the month for some people, never mind whether they have a bit of spare cash at the end of the month to put into a savings plan?

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree—this is perhaps unlike some of the measures brought in by Chancellor Gordon Brown—that it is important to keep products as simple as possible? It is also hugely important that they are transferable—a Help to Buy ISA can be transferred into the lifetime ISA—and complementary.

Rebecca Long Bailey: Indeed. Products need to be explained as simply as possible and there needs to be a commitment from the Government that there will be an adequate advertising campaign to avoid any ambiguity about a product. I shall shortly come on to some of my concerns about the specific products to which the Bill refers.

It is important to examine the fact that those who live in more deprived areas or areas that do not have access to a healthy range of high street financial services are often more financially excluded, having limited access to reasonable lending facilities. This in turn leads many to rely on extremely high interest lending facilities such as payday lenders, which are often the only lending facility available. In many cases, that initiates a cycle of debt and sucks any possible savings surplus out of the monthly pay packet. It cannot be lost on the Minister that for some time now food banks have been reporting surges in the number of people in full-time employment...
who are accessing them. This in itself may suggest that many people have no spare cash to live on day to day, let alone to save.

These problems bring me to the Opposition’s main problem with the Help to Save scheme that the Bill introduces. We wholeheartedly support moves to encourage saving for a rainy day, but in many cases the idea that those on universal credit and working tax credit have a spare £50 at the end of the month is extremely optimistic. People can barely make ends meet, as the Government found out last year when there was a cross-party backlash after they tried to take thousands of pounds from the recipients of much-needed tax credits. The transition to universal credit will arguably leave people in an even worse position.

Jane Ellison rose—

Rebecca Long Bailey: I will pre-empt the Minister’s reply that Help to Save is incredibly similar to the saving gateway scheme that was piloted by the previous Labour Government.

Jane Ellison: I do not wish to interrupt the hon. Lady, but it is important to make the point that this is about people saving up to £50. It must not be suggested that everyone must save £50. The figure is up to £50, and that can be a very small amount. I would just like to make that clear.

Rebecca Long Bailey: I thank the Minister for clarifying that point, but I think that some people would struggle to save even £5 a month, let alone £50.

Let me go back to the point I was trying to make about Labour’s scheme. We did introduce a similar scheme, but it is important to note that we had not spent the previous six years eroding the disposable income of the people whom it targeted. Help to Save might well look good on paper in terms of helping those on low incomes to save, but I must warn the Minister that, given the long-term effect of Government cuts and wider austerity measures, it will not have the desired impact in many cases. The cuts the Government are making to universal credit alone will cost 2.5 million families up to £1,600 a month, to put into this savings scheme?

It appears that the Government are not expecting the measure to put rocket boosters, as it were, under savings by those on low incomes. Their costing for the policy is £70 million in 2020-21. Some 3.5 million people will be eligible for the scheme, so if my and the IFS’s calculations are correct, that works out as a Government bonus of £20 per eligible individual in 2020-21.

I was very excited to read the Government’s impact assessment in the past few hours. However, the Minister should note that it arrived at only 1 pm today, and while I am pleased that it arrived at all, she will appreciate that it is really not acceptable to provide such information at the 11th hour if the Government wish to be transparent. I am pleased that it arrived at all, she will appreciate that because not everybody will take it up, this is not a partial success or that a large number of people might take up the scheme, she seems to be saying that because not everybody will take it up, this is not worth doing.

Rebecca Long Bailey: No, that is not what I am saying at all. It is important that we address this issue, but we have to be clear about how we do so. Dealing with the root causes of poverty and people’s inability to save is the first important thing that the Government need to look at, and then the second element they need to consider when rolling out the measures in the Bill is the specific groups they intend to target. If they do not target the 3.5 million people who are eligible to take part in the scheme, how will they help those who do not take part in it?

There is considerable unease about the lifetime ISA policy across the pensions industry, the trade union movement, the Office for Budget Responsibility and Select Committees of this House. The Opposition support the idea of incentivising people to save for the future, especially for retirement income, but we are concerned that the scheme could create a diversion from saving in traditional pension products, rather than being an add-on to one’s main pension plan. Even a former Pensions Minister stated that the LISA “could even destroy pensions”. The UK faces a pensions time bomb. Eleven million people are signed up to defined benefit schemes in 6,000 pension funds in the UK, but PricewaterhouseCoopers recently produced data showing that the collective deficit in those 6,000 schemes had risen by £100 billion in just one month so that it stood at £710 billion at the end of August. Earlier this year, the OECD reported that we had spent 10% of their wages into a pension for 40 years could expect just over half the earnings of someone who had saved the same amount but retired 15 years ago.

This situation is very worrying, especially when the state pension in its current form certainly cannot be relied on to plug the gap. Last week, the OBR published a report concluding that recent pensions and savings measures
introduced or announced by the Government would create a £5 billion a year black hole in the public finances. The report states:

“The net effect on the public finances is positive in the early years, peaking at £2.3 billion in 2018-19 before turning negative from 2021-22—the year after our March 2016 forecast horizon...But the small net gain to the public finances from these measures over the medium-term is reversed in the long term as the net cost continues to rise, reaching £5 billion by 2034-35. Expressed as a share of GDP—a more relevant metric when considering fiscal sustainability—the net cost builds up until it reaches a steady state toward the end of the period of just over 0.1 per cent of GDP. If that steady-state effect was to continue to the end of our usual long-term projection horizon of 50 years, that seemingly small cost would add 3.7 per cent of GDP to public sector net debt.”

The report also said that these measures “shifted incentives in a way that makes pensions saving less attractive—particularly for higher earners—and non-pension savings more attractive—often in ways that can most readily be taken up by the same higher earners.”

That is a pretty worrying assessment of the Government’s pensions and savings policy, in which the LISA will play a large part.

I am also worried about the level of assessment that the Government have carried out about the impact that the LISA could have on pension savings, and, more specifically, their auto-enrolment scheme. The Work and Pensions Committee has outlined its concerns about the threat to automatic enrolment in workplace pensions, the roll-out of which is having a great deal of success. The Committee was particularly worried about the risk to automatic enrolment in workplace pensions, that seemingly small cost would add 3.7 per cent of GDP to public sector net debt.

The Minister therefore confirm whether she has made any assessment of the impact of the LISA on automatic enrolment into workplace pensions? Will she confirm what safeguards will be put in place to ensure that people do not opt out of auto-enrolment? Will the Government mount a detailed advertising campaign, as suggested by the Select Committee, to ensure that people do not wrongly view the LISA as their main pension product? The Pensions Regulator has argued that by 2017, when the LISA is available, there will be hundreds of small and micro-businesses will not have rolled out auto-enrolment. Have the Government considered timing the LISA roll-out to coincide with the full completion of auto-enrolment to avoid the risks I have outlined?

It is acknowledged that LISAs will be successful among those who have savings elsewhere. There might simply be a case of them transferring those savings into LISAs, but will the Government provide the distributional analysis of the income groups who will specifically benefit the most? Will they confirm what impact the scheme will have on women and minority groups, especially, and therefore provide a much more detailed impact assessment, as the Work and Pensions Committee suggested? Will the Minister confirm what the Government will do to assess those groups that are not currently saving or unable to save, and what will they do to ensure that these people will be able to avail themselves of the scheme? The Select Committee has suggested that those who might benefit most from the scheme could be those who can afford to contribute to a pension scheme and deposit additional savings in a LISA to complement their retirement savings—higher earners, in other words. In these difficult economic times, Opposition Members question whether the scheme is an effective use of up to £2 billion of public funds.

Another concern is not simply that people will use the LISA as an alternative pension product, but that there will be nothing to stop them from taking the money early for other purposes, aside from as a deposit for a house. The Bill enforces a 25% charge for the early withdrawal of funds, which effectively removes the Government bonus, but people will not lose anything from their savings. That will therefore not be a significant deterrent from removing money early, so there is a significant risk for those who use the product as their sole pension income.

LISA funds may be used towards a deposit for a first home. That is not a bad thing, but the Government are failing to address the wider problems that are causing the housing crisis. There is no point having a deposit if there are no houses to buy. We need a significant private and social house building programme supported by the Government, not populist policy making. It is a shame that fewer new homes were built during the previous Parliament than under any peacetime Government since the 1920s. Labour has committed to build more than 1 million new homes over the next Parliament, and that is the level of intervention that is required of any Government who truly want to ensure that everyone can live in a decent and secure home.

Mr Gareth Thomas: Before my hon. Friend concludes her speech, may I suggest one further area on which Labour Front Benchers could press the Government in Committee? The Bill does not include a requirement that any employer should offer payroll deduction services, but that could help all savers, especially those on low and middle incomes. In that way, people could, if they wanted, have money deducted from their pay at source by their employer—ideally that would go into a bank account in their union, but it could go into any other source of savings. I suspect that that would create a significant boost to savings in this country.
Rebecca Long Bailey: My hon. Friend makes a very important point that Labour Front Benchers are considering in detail.

The Opposition have serious concerns about the policies in the Bill, as I have outlined, and I hope that the Minister will respond to my various queries. However, as I have confirmed, we support the overarching aim of encouraging people to save at a time when they are not doing so. There is significant room for improvement in the Bill, so we will try to amend and improve it as it makes its way through Parliament in the coming weeks to try to alleviate some of our stakeholders’ concerns about the possible effect of the lifetime ISA and the Help to Save scheme.

5.34 pm

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak briefly on Second Reading and to support two schemes that are an excellent part of what should be a wider strategy to tackle a fundamental and chronic lack of saving in all age groups and all income levels in our country. I want to say a few words about the schemes themselves and then about the scale of the problem and what more the Government might like to do in the years to come to address a chronic issue that should trouble us all, particularly the Treasury.

The problem is greater than many of us like to imagine; the state of saving in this country is worse than we like to kid ourselves. I remember going to visit my grandparents when I was a child and seeing on their mantelpiece a jam jar in which they used to put sixpences to save up for things such as a holiday to Blackpool and for rainy days, should things have got worse. Back then, I think they were the only people on their street who did that and who could afford the coach to Blackpool once a year. I think that my grandmother would put half a crown in a box just below the sofa, to save up for something or other every year, such as a new chair or stool for the house.

That seems like another country and another age—something that could never happen nowadays, when we are all so much richer and have so much greater access to spending. Of course, the statistics—we have heard some of them already—show that that is not the case at all.

Those experiences come from a time before the rise of hire purchase, credit cards, overdrafts and mortgages, all of which, although they have brought with them problems and difficulties that we have to cope with, have created a safety net of sorts against the real fragility that previous generations used to feel, going back as long as anyone can remember. The historian in me thinks of medieval, Georgian and Victorian times, when people used to feel that they were living fragile lives because they could fall from what were then called respectable lives into abject poverty purely as a result of ill fate, including illness, losing a job and having an unscrupulous landlord.

We like to think that those things could not happen today, but, of course, they can, and the statistics that we have heard from both Front Benchers show that very clearly. A quarter of households have less than £1,100 in their total financial assets, and debts of more than £3,500. One in 10 of us has available savings—rainy day money in the jam jar on the mantelpiece—of less than £100. That means less than £100 if someone happens to lose their job, if their company goes bust or if they were in the private rented sector and had an unscrupulous landlord. That should make us all very worried indeed.

Even beyond the poorest in society—those who should be very concerned about short-term saving—there is a crisis in long-term saving, and it looks more and more like an impending disaster for the country. We are all—rich and poor, young and old alike—simply not saving anything like enough.

The latest Deloitte survey shows that, by 2050, the retirement savings gap—the difference between what people will save and what they need to save, if they want to have a reasonable standard of life in retirement—will be £350 billion, which is an increase of £32 billion from five years ago, despite the many measures introduced by the previous Administration and the coalition. On average, each of us has to put away an extra £10,000 every year to avoid what we could think of as a miserable old age. Even people on middle and higher earnings—including all of us in this Chamber—would probably struggle to do that, if we want to pay our mortgages, bring up our children and enjoy a reasonable standard of living in the interim years.

One reason for that, among others, is that we are living much longer. Not only will future Governments struggle to maintain current levels of state pension payment, but we are spending longer in retirement and the cost of retirement income has risen. The latest BlackRock survey calculated that for a 70-year-old male to buy £1 of retirement income via an annuity would have cost £6 in 1970, but today it would cost £12. The cost of retiring is rising dramatically. We all know this, but it is worth underlining that we need a fundamental change in our cultural attitudes towards money and saving.

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): Many of us in the Scottish National party would agree with everything that the hon. Gentleman has said so far. However, the argument against the lifetime ISA is that far from encouraging extra saving, it diverts existing savings from pensions into housing and stokes up the housing market. It does not actually resolve the problem that he has described so eloquently.

Robert Jenrick: I am interested in the point that the hon. Gentleman makes, and I will say more about the lifetime ISA in a moment. The point of it is that many of us in our 20s and 30s—I am just about in that category—are more preoccupied with getting on the housing ladder than we are with looking out for our retirement, and that is a major worry for the Government and for future Governments. The lifetime ISA is flexible, however, because it enables people to spend money in the early years to try to get on the housing ladder, and later to convert the product into something else with a view to retirement. The hon. Gentleman raises a major problem, and we need to look at many solutions; this, I am afraid, is only one.

There needs to be a fundamental change in all our attitudes. We should not purely seek instant gratification; we, as individuals, and the Government must promote ways in which to defer gratification through saving, in contrast to our present, quite corrosive, consumer attitude.

I warmly welcome the lifetime ISA. It is an extremely popular product and there has been a lot of interest in it. I do not represent a particularly wealthy constituency—
the average wage is just below the national average—but many of my constituents have said to me that they would like to take up the lifetime ISA. Clearly, offering a 25% top-up as well as the usual tax advantages of an ISA gives us all a strong incentive to save. ISAs are popular, as we know from the millions of people who have taken them up over the years. Contrary to some of the comments that we have heard today and comments in the press, ISAs are simple. We all understand them, and they are part of our saving culture.

I welcomed the news in April that the limit would be raised on the standard ISA from £15,000 to £20,000 a year. That might sound like a great deal of money to many people, but as the problem of insufficient saving affects all income levels, it is an important measure. This is an exciting development for those of us—particularly the younger generation—who will not benefit from generous final salary pension schemes. Although the scheme is not intended to take over from pensions, it creates more flexibility in the sector. Under the previous Chancellor, we saw that across a whole range of issues to do with pensions, flexibility is key.

The lifetime ISA will help younger people to save for a deposit, which is, as we all know, the primary preoccupation of every young person with more than a basic level of income. If this vehicle allows us to help any of them to get on to the housing ladder and then to convert to a product that will help them to save for the rest of their working lives, it will be very useful.

Help to Save explicitly does the same job for those on very low incomes. I appreciate that there are many people, including many in my own constituency, for whom saving seems like another country; it is extremely difficult for them to do. But the alternative is to do nothing and to accept that we live in a country where people cannot save in that jam jar, and where the Government cannot create mechanisms to incentivise them to do so and top up what they have saved. The 50% contribution rate is clearly a great incentive, which we should all appreciate and welcome.

Rather as the IFS has said, it would be helpful for the Government to do more work on understanding which groups are the most critical in terms of saving, and to develop more products that specifically target the core group that we are most worried about—the people who have only £100 or £1000 in the bank as a rainy day fund. That is a very worrying state of affairs.

What else should I raise? One area we should look at is savings interest tax. I am in favour of simple and bold tax reforms that will not complicate the already far too complicated tax code even further, but send everyone in society the extremely clear message that the Government believe we need to save more and will back that up with action. I would strongly welcome a further move to take more people out of paying savings interest tax. The announcement in April, creating a £1,000 threshold for those on the basic rate and a £500 threshold for higher rate taxpayers—was excellent, and we should look at more changes, not least because current levels of interest rates are so pitifully low that the Government are receiving very little, and rapidly declining, tax revenues from savings income. In 2013-14, the income to the Treasury was £2.8 billion, but it is estimated to be £1.1 billion this year and to continue to decline further. Those are obviously large sums, but what would create a greater incentive and give a stronger signal than to say that we will no longer charge tax on savings interest?

My last point is simply to reiterate the one made in debates in recent weeks, which is that interest rates are too low in this country. That has had a very corrosive impact on pensioners and anyone trying to save in this country, on the gap between the rich and the poor, and on the wider economy. I, like many others, was delighted to hear the Prime Minister imply in her speech in Birmingham that she would like to take action on this matter.

Mr Gareth Thomas: The hon. Gentleman is making a very powerful application to serve on the Public Bill Committee. Given his point about low interest rates, does he not share the concern of many outside the House—indeed, it is a concern of mine—about the fact that the qualifying period to get the Government’s bonus payment under the Help to Save scheme is two years, rather than just 12 months? Would not a shorter period be a further and more sensible incentive to get people saving more quickly?

Robert Jenrick: I listened to the hon. Gentleman’s intervention earlier, and I would be interested to hear the Minister’s views on that. We want to create as many incentives as possible for everybody—from the rich to the poor, from the young to the old—to save because, as I hope I have made the principal point of my remarks, this country is facing a crisis and we all need to take responsibility for it.

On interest rates, the Bank of England now needs to take action. I did not believe there was any real cause to lower interest rates earlier this summer. It misread the initial signals after the referendum and acted too soon. We have already seen that the consequences of the referendum, at least in the short term, will not be as severe as it imagined. I hope the Bank of England—of course, it is independent—does not reduce interest rates further, and that we can now move away from the policy of quantitative easing as soon as possible for many reasons, but particularly for the sake of pensioners and savers.

I want the Government to create a long-term strategy on saving that tries to change the culture in this country towards looking to the future and putting money aside. The Government need to back that in many ways, some of which will involve extremely difficult decisions. One of those decisions will, of course, be to continue to raise the state pension age to protect the triple lock, which I would like to happen as soon as possible. The two schemes we are considering today are excellent. I fully support them, and I hope that they will be the first of many from the new Administration.

5.48 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick). I was interested that he started by talking about a long-term savings plan for the Government. I suppose the long-term economic plan has crashed and burned, so they need another anachronism that they can use for the future.

SNP Members welcome any reasonable proposals that encourage savings—we will work, where we can, with the UK Government to seek to encourage pension
savings—but we very much see the Bill as a missed opportunity for us all to champion what we should be focusing on, which is strengthening pensions savings. Instead we have another wheeze that emanated from the laboratory of ideas of the previous Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), and his advisers, who had form on constantly tinkering with the savings landscape. The right hon. Gentleman may have gone from the Front Bench, but his memory lingers on with this Bill.

Let us recall what the former Chancellor said in his Budget speech this year:

“too many young people in their 20s and 30s have no pension and few savings. Ask them and they will tell you why. It is because they find pensions too complicated and inflexible, and most young people face an agonising choice of either saving to buy a home or saving for their retirement.”—[Official Report, 16 March 2016; Vol. 607, c. 966.]

The problem was that that assertion was not backed up by evidence, and it was half-baked. Young people under the age of 30 have the lowest level of opt-out rates of all those who have been automatically enrolled into workplace pensions. Department for Work and Pensions research found that for under-30s the opt-out rate is 8%, compared with 9% for 30 to 49-year-olds and 50% for those aged 50 and over. One would have thought that the Chancellor and the Minister had looked at the DWP evidence and recognised that the assertion behind the justification for these measures is quite simply wrong. The fundamental principle, that young people are not saving for a pension when presented with a solution for pension saving such as auto-enrolment, is wrong. After much effort, automatic enrolment has been successful in encouraging young people to save. We must not undermine those efforts by inadvertently encouraging people to opt out and confusing consumers with new, competing products. As has been stated by the likes of Zurich Insurance:

“There is a real danger that the LISA could significantly derail auto-enrolment and reverse the progress made in encouraging people to save for later life.”

I agree with that. Why would we want to undermine pension savings?

Of course we know that the Treasury has flown kites on moving from the existing arrangements for pensions—exempt, exempt, tax—to considering tax, exempt, exempt. That would have a drastic impact on incentivising pension savings, but clearly from the Government’s point of view it would mean higher tax receipts today rather than pensions being taxed on exit. This is a wheeze from the previous Chancellor to deliver higher taxation income today, rather than taxing consumption in the future—a modern day reverse Robin Hood.

Is it not the case that when this idea was kicked into the long grass along came the Chancellor with proposals to achieve the same ends through the backdoor? Is this the first step to moving towards tax, exempt, exempt? If it is, the Government should come clean. If they do so, we on the Scottish National party Benches will vigorously oppose it, because it would amount to an attack on pension savings. We should recall, after all, that it was Gordon Brown, when he was Chancellor, who raided pension schemes with his dividend tax changes—an attack that seriously undermined defined benefit pension schemes in particular.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman not agree that what Gordon Brown did when he was Prime Minister—taxing pension schemes—was catastrophic? I know that, because I had a pension scheme and stopped paying into it.

Ian Blackford: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman that that was the beginning of the end for defined benefit pension schemes in this country. At the time, just about every company in the FTSE 100 had a defined benefit pension scheme. There are hardly any today. My criticism of what the Government are doing with the Bill is that they are once again undermining pension saving. I will come on to the facts of the matter. We cannot get away from this: anybody saving into a pension does so out of pre-tax income. Anybody investing in the LISA will be doing so out of taxed income. That is unfair and unjust. As I mentioned earlier, this is more about a wheeze for the Government to generate taxation income. It is wrong and they should not be doing it without proper incentives for the young people they are targeting.

We would resist any further attempts to undermine pension saving and, specifically, to change the tax status of pension savings. That would be little more than an underhand way of driving up tax receipts—sweet talking workers to invest after-tax income in LISAs when their interests are best served by investing in pensions. We have considerable challenges in ensuring that we take appropriate action and provide the right kind of leadership to encourage pension savings above all else. That is not happening under this Conservative Government. Pension savings are the most tax-efficient arrangement for savers and that is what we ought to prioritise.

We also need to revisit the issue of pension tax relief to make it fairer to pension savers. Many commentators and providers, such as Zurich, have suggested that a flat rate of pension tax relief could increase saving among low earners. While ensuring pensions remain an attractive investment for higher earners, it would be inherently fairer. Coupled with auto-enrolment, it would give a powerful boost to the pensions of millions of workers and help the vast majority of people to save more for retirement. It would also end the complexity of the current regime and set tax relief at a sustainable level for the longer term. That kind of approach rather flies in the face of what the Minister has signed off in the impact assessment, which states:

“The government could have done nothing more, relying on existing tax incentives to promote saving among younger people and working families on low income. However, this would have failed to provide the necessary level of support for those who are unable to use existing support to plan and save for their future.”

This is bunkum. Tax relief can be addressed, as I have said, but we must also take into account the fact that a review of auto-enrolment is due in 2017. We can strengthen auto-enrolment to deliver inclusion and encourage pension saving. We want to work with the Government to strengthen auto-enrolment and pension savings, which are the most efficient way for young people to save.

Just today, as we debate the Bill, the Financial Times has published an article highlighting new analysis on pension savings conducted by Actuaries’ Centre. The paper concluded that UK pension savings have a massive deficit of £11 billion a year. A poll of 2,000 pension savers indicates that only 16% of workers are saving enough to
maintain their standard of living when they stop work. Why on earth do we want to take action away, through the Bill the Government are bringing forward, from pension savings? Why are we not focusing on what we should be doing: fixing the problems in the pension industry? That is the priority of those of us on the SNP Benches.

The Aon analysis suggests that members of defined contribution schemes on average need to pay an extra £1,400 a year to achieve a decent retirement income. That is what we should be addressing in this Chamber here tonight. My message to the Government is this: let us all work together to tackle the under-investment in pension savings, to deal with the many challenges we face, and to enhance the attractions of pension savings. That is the priority. Today, too many people are excluded from workplace pensions.

I commend the introduction of auto-enrolment, but recognise that more needs to be done to enhance auto-enrolment and seek to offer affordable solutions to the low-paid, women and the self-employed who, to use the Prime Minister’s term, have been left behind. We need to tackle the issue of those who are currently excluded, such as the 20% of workers who earn less than £10,000 a year. We need to make sure we have an inclusive approach to pension savings that works for all workers.

The average value of conventional ISAs held by those aged between 25 and 34 is £5,186. The annual allowance for the lifetime ISA as proposed is £4,000, so from experience of ISAs this question needs to be addressed: who exactly will benefit? It looks like yet another policy to benefit the rich who can afford to save at such a level and therefore get the full benefits of the Government bonus. So much for the sermon from the Prime Minister about delivering policies for those left behind. It looks to us more like the same old policies for the benefit of the wealthy. When we look at the news today we see that the UK is looking to spend billions of pounds for the City to access the single market—and we should not be surprised. It is yet another case of the poor subsidising the rich.

We need to address the unintended consequences of quantitative easing, which has driven down yields, moderating expectations of future growth for pension funds and substantially increasing the deficit for many defined pension schemes, as the hon. Member for Salford Funds and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey) mentioned. If we add to that the decline in annuity rates, which is cutting expectations of pensioner income, it means that savers have to increase their contributions to defined contribution schemes. This makes for a challenging environment for pension savers, which needs to be addressed.

On 11 July, the former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, the right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Stephen Crabb), said that “there is a very real systemic issue with DB pension schemes that we need to look at, and my Department will be discussing it further in the months ahead.”—[Official Report, 11 July 2016; Vol. 613, c. 10J].

Since that statement, there has been silence from the Government. Where is the response to the fundamental challenges for today’s pensions and, as some might argue, the crisis in both defined benefit and defined contribution schemes?

We know of the significant factors affecting the BHS and British Steel schemes, and we know that hundreds of other schemes are facing significant deficits. Rather than seeing the Government face up to these challenges and the threat to the many beneficiaries of the schemes, we see a missed opportunity to tackle what ought to be the priorities. When will the Government respond in detail to what the former Secretary of State for Work and Pensions admitted, which we all know to be the case? I give the Minister the opportunity to intervene and tell us what the Government have done since the announcement of the previous Secretary of State. Where is the Government’s response? What do they have to say about the deficit on defined pension schemes? I see Government Members on the Front Bench looking down, but we need answers. What we get from this Government is no action.

Jane Ellison: I draw the House’s attention to the fact that we had DWP questions earlier today, and I am sure the hon. Gentleman took the opportunity to put his question then.

Ian Blackford: That was a politic answer. I cannot help but remark that I asked the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions a question earlier today, which was enlightening in itself. I asked a question about the WASPI women. I raised a specific point, saying that the SNP had put proposals in front of this Government as we were asked to do. We said that we could deal with the WASPI issue by spending £8 million, which, by the way, the Government could afford to spend because there is a surplus of nearly £30 billion sitting in the national insurance fund. What was the answer we got from the Secretary of State? It was to get the Scottish Government to do that. What he failed to realise is that this House has not given the Scottish Parliament the responsibility for pensions. Why not do that now, then? The Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government would certainly take responsibility for pensions and for pensioners, which this Government are walking away from.

Nothing is being done by this Government. They are like rabbits caught in headlights. That is exactly what we got when the Financial Secretary intervened just now. This is a Government who have no answers to the real issues and the real problems that affect us in the pension landscape. They have been caught doing nothing in the face of systemic risk, which the Government themselves recognise. The Financial Secretary turned around and said, “It is not for me, but for the Department for Work and Pensions”. Well, I am sorry, but she is a Minister of the Government, and this is a Government responsibility. She should be coming to this place with answers.

We also need to recognise that although this Bill will help some savers, it does little to help those who cannot afford to save for later life. Of course, we have had the benefit of the Work and Pensions Select Committee holding an inquiry into the effect of the lifetime ISA on auto-enrolment. Evidence from the Association of British Insurers stated:

“Presented as a choice, no employee will be better off saving into a Lifetime ISA than they would under automatic enrolment. This is due to the loss of employer contributions.”

A recent Standard Life analysis shows that the typical gain from tax breaks and minimum employer top-ups to a qualifying workplace pension for a basic rate taxpayer is between 70% and 85%, compared with the
return of 25% from a LISA. That is the con that this Government are trying to inflict on the people of this country. The long-term cost of forgoing annual employer contributions worth 3% of salary by saving into a LISA instead of a workplace pension would be substantial. For a basic rate taxpayer, the impact would be savings of roughly one third less by the age of 60. For example, an employee earning £25,000 per annum and saving 4% of their income each year would see a difference in excess of £53,000. After 42 years, someone saving through a pension scheme would have a pot worth £166,289.99 at a growth rate of 3%. Under a LISA at the same growth rate the value would be £112,646.75. Is the Minister going to defend this?

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a really important point about the advantages of pension saving over the new LISA, but does he share my concern that the real beneficiary of the LISA will not be people on low and middle incomes, but exceptionally rich people looking for a tax-efficient way to save very large amounts in a year?

Ian Blackford: My hon. Friend is spot on. Those who are already investing large amounts into pension schemes and perhaps approaching the cap will be turning around and saying, “Thank you very much.” This is not a policy for low and middle-income workers; this is a policy for the rich. It is the same old thing from this Tory Government who learn nothing. No wonder they are so out of touch in Scotland and no wonder that they have only one Member of Parliament in Scotland when they do not do the right thing for the pensioners in our country.

There are clear risks for young people in taking the wrong decisions if they do not get appropriate advice—something that is lacking from these proposals. Will the Government make it clear that young people will be advised of the likely outcomes of opting for a LISA over pension savings? If not, why not?

The SNP is supportive of any initiative that promotes savings for later life, but the LISA is simply a gimmick that benefits only those who can afford to save to the levels demanded by the Government to get the bonus. Help to Save is another example. We agree that working to encourage savings is welcome, but in this case again, the UK Government have only scratched the surface rather than really targeting those who are struggling to plan for emergencies or later life. Individuals eligible for Help to Save have only limited resources for saving by definition, and they will now have more difficult choices to make between medium-term savings and longer-term aspirations.

The very fact that the Government expect the policy to cost only £70 million in 2020-21 implies that the Government top-up will, on average, be only £20 per eligible individual in that year. Yes, £20—that is what this Government are proposing in this Bill. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has taken the view that Help to Save is poorly targeted, and it questioned the purpose of the scheme, stating:

“There is also a deeper and critical question about which groups are really ‘under-saving’. The key justification for giving a household extra money only if it places funds in a savings account, rather than giving it extra money regardless and letting the household decide what to do with it, is that we have reason to believe that the household is saving less than is ‘appropriate’ given its circumstances.”

The charity StepChange found through its work with poorer families and those with existing problem debt that four in 10 people struggling to save experience an income shock, such as a broken boiler or car repairs, at least every six months; that 60% of those facing an income shock turned to borrowing; and that a third of them cut back on essentials such as food to cover the costs. It found that half a million families could avoid problem debt if they had £1,000 of savings.

Responding to the Government’s consultation on Help to Save, the charity had three concerns: the proposed two-year period over which a Help to Save account will run may disincentivise applicants, and the Government should think “very carefully” about the way in which the scheme is advertised, in order to minimise a potential problem caused by the perception of a rigid two-year account length; the Treasury should amend the eligibility criteria so that those aged under 25 who work at least 30 hours a week can apply for a Help to Save account; and the Treasury should look closely at the debt-collection and insolvency implications of the scheme, and the Government should protect money in Help to Save accounts from third-party debt orders or insolvency proceedings. The charity concluded:

“At the very least any bonus accrued should be protected.”

Once again, we have seen a missed opportunity to tackle the pension saving deficit head on. While helping some, the Bill does little for those who cannot afford to save for later life. The Government must be much more ambitious if they are to deliver real dignity in retirement. We do not intend to oppose the Bill tonight, for which I am sure the House will be grateful, but we will seek to deal with the missed opportunities and to strengthen the Bill in Committee.

6.10 pm

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): I hesitate to detain the House by repeating much of what was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) in his thoughtful speech, but I particularly wanted to speak in support of the Help to Save scheme, which seems to be the Cinderella scheme in today’s debate.

Rare is the politician who understands the difference between profit and loss and the balance sheet. That is normally left to dull accountants like me. We spend a great deal of time in the House talking about people’s differential profit-and-loss accounts—the difference in earnings, and whether some members of society earn far too much in comparison with others—and we do a fair amount in trying to close that gap. However, we often fail to recognise that the solution to those inequalities in society, and the solution to the problem of poverty more generally, is first multi-generational and secondly as much about the balance sheet—the asset share that those people may have for the future—as about how much they happen to earn at the moment. Anything that enables people with low incomes, who may be on benefits or the like but who are certainly at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, to start to get the idea of saving and, in particular, investing the money saved in assets can only be applauded.

One of our problems in this country is that the collective balance sheet—the assets held both privately and publicly—is concentrated in far too few hands.
Over the last 20 or so years there has been a diminution in the number of people who own shares or, indeed, have any asset base, even ownership of their houses. We need to reverse that, but sadly it has been far too low on Ministers’ agendas. A good example is the sell-off of the Post Office. The retail tranche of sales—the shares that were to be sold to members of the public in small lots—was scaled back, while the tranche that was being sold to large institutions such as Goldman Sachs was inflated. It seemed insane that a Liberal Democrat Secretary of State, in particular, would do that. There was a lost opportunity to spread what was known back in the 1980s, in the heyday of a certain politician, as the “ownership society”. The former Member of Parliament for Richmond, Yorks, William Hague, said that we should be a share-owning, property-owning society, and should roll back the frontiers of the state to enable that to happen.

I am keen for Help to Save to be promoted, because it allows people with very low incomes, or no incomes at all, to start thinking about their own asset bases and start saving for the future. However, I should like the Minister to consider a couple of issues. First, I do not understand why there is a cap on the amount that can be contributed. If someone earning a very low wage is able to contribute £20 a week or £20 a month year in, year out, why should we seek to limit that? Why should we not allow such people to build up a fund which they could use in the future, possibly passing it on to their children, who might then decide to do the same? Secondly, £50 seems a rather small amount to me, particularly for someone who is starting to build up an amount and getting into the spirit of saving. Thirdly, especially in the current interest-rate environment, requiring people to hold their savings in cash strikes me as self-defeating. Allowing them to go to their banks and buy, for instance, shares in Marks & Spencer or Royal Bank of Scotland—when, hopefully, they become available—would give them the idea that they could benefit from the country’s asset base.

It is worth noting that, when it comes to the lump sums that people want to accumulate over their lives, their aspirations are often quite modest. Many years ago a great friend of mine who works in television was devising a new quiz show, and wanted to establish what prize money he should offer so that he could deal with the show’s finances. A survey was conducted, and people in the United Kingdom were asked what amount constituted “change your life money”. In this age of the lottery, my friend thought that the answer would be hundreds of thousands of pounds, but in fact it was just over £6,000. That is what the vast bulk of British people thought was “change your life money” which would give them the chance to start to build for the future.

Suella Fernandes (Fareham) (Con): The Money Advice Service recently found that 21 million families had less than £500 in savings. What does my hon. Friend think about the lack of financial literacy and money management skills among people who do not have the techniques and the basic understanding that would enable them to manage their personal finances?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend has touched on an interesting issue. What she has said reflects one of the observations made by the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford). Over the past three or four decades people have, perhaps, been infantilised in respect of the financial choices that they make, and politicians in the House of Commons may have imposed their choices for them. Personally, I would like the opportunity to decide between a lifetime ISA, a pension and a normal ISA, for instance, but then I am a chartered accountant of moderate skill—deeply moderate; I resigned on the day I qualified for exactly that reason—but I recognise that plenty of people feel confused and are unable to do so. We have taken the power away from them over the years, and we must start to reverse that. We must either put choice back into their hands, or educate them so that they can make those choices in the future. The financial world is becoming ever more complicated, and if people are to do well out of it—particularly those on lower incomes—they will need to have that kind of knowledge.

Another reason why people should take an interest in acquiring assets rather than the mere ins and outs of their monthly incomes is the fact that a number have missed out, recently in particular, on what could have been a big upswing in their wealth. Brexit has seen a massive rise in the stock market and many people have had stocks and shares over the last couple of months will have done extremely well. Similarly, the housing market has risen prodigiously over the last three or four years.

Ian Blackford: Does the hon. Gentleman not realise that there has been a massive 16% decline in the value of sterling over the last couple of months? Moreover, the fact that the market has risen as much as it has is due, quite simply, to the overseas earnings of United Kingdom companies. It is not that the world thinks the United Kingdom has become a more investable case; indeed, some would argue that it has become a basket case.

Kit Malthouse: I entirely agree that overseas earnings are rising. That is why the stock market has increased so significantly, and I think that is a good thing. I am proud to say that I voted “out”. I am not sure what the hon. Gentleman thinks should be the level of the pound, but I think it should be at a level that increases our overseas earnings, means that people will re-shore manufacturing—because it is now more expensive for goods to be made overseas—and helps our exporters. I cannot see that that is anything other than beneficial for a country that is carrying a massive current account deficit.

The point that I am trying to make, however, is that 40 or perhaps 30 years ago many more people were investing in the stock market by buying shares in British Gas and all the privatised industries, and those people would have been benefiting from the present upswing. I am proud to ask my postman how his shares are doing every time I see him, and I should like to be able to say the same to most people on low incomes.

Ian Blackford: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman should ask his postman how much his holiday will cost him next year. There is a real problem for the United Kingdom, which is that inflation is now going to increase. We have already seen the impact of the likes of Unilever seeking to pass on 10% price increases. At a time when wage growth in the United Kingdom is limited, we have choked off next year’s consumption. That is the effect of Brexit. This is not about wealth: it is about an economy that has been damaged by the Brexiters.
Kit Malthouse: The hon. Gentleman will not be surprised to know that I disagree with him. I hesitate to get into a bit of economic argy-bargy in this debate—I was hoping to keep my comments short—but inflation is currently running at 0.6%, and as a result we have extremely low interest rates. The Bank of England’s target is 2%. I am pleased that the low pound may help it to get to that level because there is no doubt that low inflation, or a deflationary environment in real terms, is extremely damaging to the economy. The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to hear that the effect he desires of the drop in the pound has happened: my wife and I decided just this week that this February half-term we would go to Scotland on holiday rather than overseas. We would like to explore the glorious land of his birth. I hope that more and more British consumers will do the same. We may even see the rejuvenation of the tourism industry in lovely places such as Blackpool.

Mr Gareth Thomas: The hon. Gentleman has set out three concerns, if I remember rightly, about Help to Save. I wonder whether he shares my view and that of the hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) that the Government need to do more to explain why they think there should be a two-year qualifying period for the Government bonus for Help to Save, as opposed to just 12 months.

Kit Malthouse: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. The Government should look at exactly that. The barriers to saving that are in the way of people on low incomes should be removed as much as possible. I like his suggestion that people should be able opt to save out of their payroll—that employers should make the deduction. I like anything that makes it painless. The Government opt for PAYE because it takes our taxes away from us painlessly; we do not actually have to give them over. Doing the same with savings would be a good idea.

Throughout my life, my granny, until she sadly died when she was 94, put £5 every month in a post office savings account for me. She gave the savings to me on my 21st birthday. I have always been grateful for that money. I still have it sitting in that savings account. I hope and believe that I will be able to pass it on to my three children as a sign of what can be done by putting £5 away every month—a sign of the change that is possible from the first generation, from the back streets of Harrogate, to me now as a Member of Parliament.

6.21 pm

Mr Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure—on this occasion anyway—to follow the hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse). I rise in particular to support the remarks of my hon. Friend, in particular, addressed the scale of the savings crisis. In their own different ways, they underlined the need to do a lot more to encourage those on low and modest incomes to save. It is in that spirit that I gently underline, in this, I hope, more substantive contribution, the need for the Government to look afresh at their decision on Help to Save.

The Government have decided that they will make their bonus payment after two years, as opposed to 12 months. The hon. Member for Newark talked about the person who has only £100 in their bank account and dwelt on the difficulties they have saving. Two years is a long time. I think of a constituent of mine who does the right thing and is working. She is a teaching assistant and therefore on a low income. She has faced, given the scale of the housing crisis, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles rightly alluded, significant increases in rent, and she struggles to manage her income and to pay all her bills. She is surely exactly the sort of person we would want to benefit from a scheme such as Help to Save, but I suspect that, if she thought that she was not going to get any benefit from her savings for two years, the struggle to make ends meet in the intervening period would be a significant disincentive to her setting even small amounts of money aside in a savings account. I share the concern of others that the scheme will benefit only those on in-work benefits. Again, I encourage the Government to be a little more imaginative on the scheme.

I understand and see the logic of the Government’s need to have a Help to Save implementer with national coverage. Clearly, the Government have failed to persuade traditional banks or big financial players to offer the scheme, so I can see the attraction of NS&I. What I fail to understand is why credit unions cannot be allowed to offer the service to communities in their areas alongside NS&I. I hope that the Government will reconsider that point.

I have the great privilege of chairing the all-party group on mutuals. I commend the contribution of the Building Societies Association which, in its comments on the lifetime ISA and its briefing for the debate, shares the concern that others have expressed about the risk of the lifetime ISA conflagrating savings for a house deposit and savings for retirement in one product. Again, there are concerns that the scale of withdrawal charges will be punitive. I hope that the Minister will pick up those two points.

I welcome the support of the hon. Member for North West Hampshire for the idea of making payroll deduction a statutory right. He is right to say that the Government have a statutory right to take tax through PAYE, so why should they not also support a statutory right to allow people, with their employers, to save through a credit union, a standard mutual or a mainstream bank product? Giving people the right to payroll deduction would be of huge long-term benefit. Many of the credit unions that are highly successful underline regularly how important the facility of payroll deduction is to their ability to offer financial services, particularly in the savings context, to their members. For a while, one issue prevented an armed forces credit union from being established. When one considers that before credit unions came along one considered that before credit unions came along one understands the scale of the benefit that credit unions are beginning to offer to armed forces personnel.
[Mr Gareth Thomas]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury has a reputation as a shrewd and effective operator around Whitehall. Now that she is in the Treasury, she has even more power at her disposal. Many parts of government, whether Whitehall directly, agencies outside Whitehall, the NHS, individual academies, academy chains or indeed some parts of local government, still do not offer payroll deduction services for credit unions that want to serve their employees. One thing the Minister could do if she is not immediately persuaded—I hope she will be by the time the Bill completes its passage—would be to use the weight of the Treasury to encourage all Whitehall Departments to check that every bit of government for which they are responsible allows payroll deduction and lets credit unions offer savings and other financial services to their employees. If the police can offer payroll deduction services—many police officers and other police staff are signed up to credit unions—and if our armed forces can do it, why cannot all of government offer this service? I therefore hope the Minister will not only lead a drive on allowing payroll deduction, but will be willing to contemplate amending the Bill to make payroll deduction a statutory right.

It is worth reflecting briefly on the appetite across the House for more diverse financial markets. Arguably, one of the reasons why organisations within the financial services community can sometimes make high charges for their services is that there is not enough competition. Encouraging more savings through building societies, and in particular trying to build up the credit union sector, is surely something that every Treasury Bill, and indeed every Government Bill, should have at the back of its mind. Might there be an opportunity to encourage more tax incentives for savers? The armed forces credit union has been established. Why should there not be tax incentives to encourage more of our soldiers, sailors and air force personnel to sign up and support that credit union, and benefit from its services?

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my fellow Co-operative MP for giving way and apologise for not being able to be in the Chamber to hear the whole debate—I was at another debate in Westminster Hall. I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend’s remarks and pay tribute to his work on the armed forces credit union. I will certainly support the amendment that he suggests tabling. Does he agree that we should also look at countries such as Canada and Germany, where there is diversity in savings, and where much stronger credit unions are available to a much wider group of the population?

Mr Thomas: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Many financial services markets around the world are far more diverse than the UK’s, and therefore far more competitive. We need to build up our building societies and other mutuals such as credit unions, and further tax incentives that encourage saving and taking up other financial services through mutuals can only be a good thing.

I have no intention of voting against the Bill, but I share the concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles. I hope that both Front-Bench teams will reflect on my suggested amendments and that we will see progress on the concerns that they address during the Bill’s passage.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) on his comments, particularly those about the Help to Save product the Government are introducing. He talked about the Government looking at the role of credit unions and whether it would be possible to use payroll. It would be helpful if the Ministers, whom I welcome to the Chamber, commented on those matters, as well as some of the IFS criticisms and the very helpful Library briefing.

I want to focus on the Government’s lifetime ISA. We should not question its intentions. Its simple aim is to increase savings among the young and to help more people on to the housing ladder, and surely none of us can have any objection to that in principle. The difficulty is that we do not, of course, start with a blank sheet of paper, and adding yet more products to the already complicated savings landscape risks bringing unintended consequences. I want to focus on that risk.

As the Library briefing rather coyly puts it, over the past 25 years, a string of largely tax-based savings incentive schemes has been brought in under different Governments. Some Members will remember the stakeholder scheme, yet not many will perhaps now remember personal equity plans, tax-exempt special savings accounts, child trust funds—they ceased not that long ago—or indeed the saving gateway, which was never rolled out nationally. When we consider the lifetime ISA and what it is proposed that it will achieve, we must also bear in mind what other savings products exist.

Under the general heading of “savings” I include pensions; they are simply a particular form of savings designed primarily to provide people with adequate income in retirement. Of course as we live ever longer, the value of having those savings, lasting well beyond an age to which people were expected to live not long ago, becomes more important. The Government have a crucial role to play as the body that will prop up all or any of us when we run out of savings. I want to focus on a couple of things within the product range of savings and the potential unintended consequences of this Bill.

The LISA was introduced in this year’s Budget after the Chancellor said that it was clear there was no consensus on the future development of pensions. But in a sense he revealed his own hand by increasing the ISA limit and proposing the introduction of the lifetime ISA. This showed the Treasury’s direction of travel very clearly. It is no surprise that the Centre for Policy Studies has welcomed this ISA since, it says, it is similar to a proposal made in the past. Indeed, Michael Johnson at the CPS has been advocating the end of pensions for a long time. I have described him as the Guy Fawkes of the pensions industry—he would love to blow the whole thing up tomorrow if he could. The lifetime ISA was just one of his steps towards that goal, with a workplace ISA coming in next.

That is where some of the problems start. The Chancellor’s main underlying argument for introducing the LISA was that younger people did not understand pensions—that they were far too complicated and were not popular and therefore we needed to use the well-known brand of the ISA. I have clashed many times with the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford)—mostly happily—on pensions issues.
His contributions are normally way over the top, as, unsurprisingly; they were again this evening. However, he was right to use the quotation in the Association of British Insurers briefing, demonstrating that, interestingly, the opt-out rates in auto-enrolment among the under-30s have been the lowest of all age groups. That arguably suggests that younger people do not necessarily find pensions complicated when they are provided with a solution in the workplace into which they, their employer and the Government can all contribute and the paperwork is easy. So pensions do not have to be any more complex than any other form of savings, but what makes the whole sector more complicated is the constant temptation of successive Chancellors to act as product designer for the industry and introduce yet more different products.

Kit Malthouse: I am a little puzzled by my hon. Friend’s use of the statistic that the under-30s have the lowest opt-out rate. The under-30s will of course become the over-30s and the over-40s, and they might well opt out at that point. Their continuing to opt in at this early stage, when they might not have quite so much pressure on their wage packet, is not necessarily indicative of what they will do in the future.

Richard Graham: My hon. Friend makes a perfectly reasonable point, but he should bear in mind the fact that opt-out rates were expected to be 25% and are averaging 9% so far. The Government’s expectations about opt-out rates have therefore, happily, been proved wrong. He is right to say that the under-30s will become the over-30s, but we should all be trying to encourage those people to stay in and build up their savings through the pension scheme, rather than introducing a competitive product that could, for various marketing reasons, seem more attractive and therefore divert people of all ages from the good and noble cause, which I think he supports, of building up more savings for their retirement.

Ian Blackford: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that auto-enrolment has been an enormous success, and that one reason for that success has been the relatively low opt-out rates? Does he also agree, however, that there is more to be done to ensure that we include low-paid workers, particularly women and the self-employed? That should be the focus, but the tragedy of the Bill is that it deflects attention from what we should be doing—namely, incentivising pension saving.

Richard Graham: That is an interesting point. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that auto-enrolment is not good for the self-employed, and there are other aspects of it, including women’s savings, that could be improved. Yes, there has been success, but my “yes” is a cautious one. After all, auto-enrolment has not been going for very long. The real test will be over the next couple of years when up to 4 million people could come into the scheme, taking it from roughly 6.9 million savers at the moment to more than 10 million fairly soon. We will have to see whether they come in with the same enthusiasm as did those who work for larger employers. My point is that introducing the lifetime ISA at this stage, before we know how smaller employers and their employees are going to react, risks undermining the success of auto-enrolment so far.

In 2005, the Pensions Commission described pensions, and the tax relief on pensions, as “poorly understood, unevenly distributed, and the cost is significant.” It was absolutely right. The cost to the Treasury is £34 billion a year, and it receives back some £13 billion in tax on pensions, so there is a huge cost involved. I am pretty sure that that is why the Treasury is rightly trying to shape a savings policy that is both good for individuals and not so expensive for taxpayers or for the Treasury as the intermediary. I would like to see a much more co-ordinated effort by the Treasury and the Department for Work and Pensions to look closely at the existing range of savings offerings, pensions included, to see how they can be rationalised in order to come up with a simpler, less expensive method of encouraging people to save.

It is interesting that the online information sheet on the lifetime ISA does not mention the fact that contributions come from someone’s salary after they have paid tax. It also strongly urges people to “use it to save for retirement”.

That is exactly what we would expect people to do with a pensions product, so the concept that the lifetime ISA is not competitive with auto-enrolment and other pensions offerings is slightly disingenuous. Others have made the point that it is competitive with auto-enrolment and therefore offers significant potential for many of our constituents. Let me quote briefly from one or two of those who have highlighted this issue.

The Pensions and Lifetime Savings Association, which used to be called the National Association of Pension Funds, illustrates my point that all pensions are now, rightly, considered to be savings products. It comments: “We look forward to working with the Government to help make sure that the Lifetime ISA does help younger people build up their savings.”

It goes on to say that it is important to ensure that “the regulation on charges and governance of the Lifetime ISA are comparable to those for pensions, which have been reviewed to make sure they offer savers good value”. That refers to the cap on charges and the increased governance. The association is implicitly recognising that this product will be considered by consumers as an alternative to saving. Indeed, former pensions Minister Steve Webb says: “There is a real danger that the new product will mean that many young people will not start saving for their retirement until their thirties” because that option is available to them through the lifetime ISA.

It is also interesting that the Association of British Insurers, Zurich and Hargreaves Lansdown have all expressed concern. One of the points raised by the Institute for Fiscal Studies is exactly the same point that I made in an article earlier today in which I referred to the lack of clarity over the extent to which there will be new savings, as against the shifting of existing funds by people who have already saved in ISAs. We must recognise the fact that 21 million people have invested in ISAs. That is not a small body of people. It is not a narrow cohort consisting exclusively of the very rich, for example. If savings are recycled and 80% of the people who put money into a cash ISA in 2014-15 recycle their money into a lifetime ISA to get the 25% Government bonus, that would not necessarily demonstrate a success for the Government in terms of bringing in new savers and people who would not otherwise have the chance of getting on to the housing ladder. Rather, it would demonstrate
that people who already have savings are being given an opportunity to increase the return on those savings, and that higher-rate earners will have an opportunity to provide lifetime ISAs for their children or grandchildren.

It would help if the Minister clarified what impact assessment the Treasury has carried out. How much money does it expect to come in from new savers? How much does it expect to be recycled from existing ISA-holders? Who will be the beneficiaries of the lifetime ISA? My concern is that the main beneficiaries of the vast weight of the £850 million that this will cost the Treasury and therefore the taxpayer will be people who already earn quite a lot, or their children, and that the benefits will not reach the many, even though that is the intention behind the Bill.

I have tried to address some of the issues and unintended consequences that could arise from the Bill. Hargreaves Lansdown has written a useful paper on simplifying ISAs and pensions, in which it proposes a number of changes to ISAs. It is worth flagging them up today. It proposes: consolidating six different types of ISA into one; limiting the cost to the Exchequer of the Government top-up to the lifetime ISA; simplifying ISA decision making for investors; reducing the administrative burden for the industry; retaining the help-to-buy element of the lifetime ISA in one simple ISA product; and eliminating the risk that the ISA will undermine pension saving. It goes on to make a similar number of recommendations on pensions as well. The last point about eliminating the risk that the LISA will undermine pension saving is the one to which I keep returning because it is possible to do these things in a different way.

The Pensions Policy Institute found that Canada, Australia, New Zealand, US and Singapore—all countries that broadly follow Anglo-Saxon approaches to finance and investment—allow early access from the same product used for pension saving. That is critical because it means that people do not have to choose between a LISA or auto-enrolment and that they can decide whether they want to save to get on to the housing ladder or to save for their retirement through the same product. It would be a major achievement of this Government and Treasury and DWP Ministers if they could work together to rationalise the structure of pensions and savings so that individual consumers can access the same product for different reasons without having to subscribe separately. That would eliminate the main concern of many about the unintended consequence of the LISA directly and negatively impacting auto-enrolment. That is why I will certainly not be voting against the Government but will abstain from voting on the Bill this evening.

6.51 pm

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham). I am sure the Bill covers the self-employed, but that has not been brought up today. When I was self-employed 20 years ago, the then Government made a change to taxation which basically meant that a substantial amount of every pound that I put into my pension pot was taken out in cash, so I stopped paying into a private pension. The policy in front of us today proposes a break in that sort of behaviour, particularly for the self-employed. The self-employed have always been worried about the harmonisation of national insurance contributions. When I was the Prime Minister’s ambassador for the self-employed, I worked closely with my right hon. Friends the Members for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid) and for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith) on trying to harmonise national insurance contributions so that self-employed people would eventually have the same state pension.

However, I want to talk about the lifetime ISA proposal, because it should not be confused with an extra pension top-up, about which every speaker in the debate before me has talked. It should instead be seen as a savings guarantee for the future. It was a tidy move by the Treasury and the Department for Work and Pensions in reaching the point of harmonising NICs. This proposal takes us a little further into the realms of the self-employed being able to look after themselves in future.

I do not want the LISA to be confused with a pension supplement. It is not that. It is something that helps to save for the future. To put it in perspective, we hear a lot of doom and gloom, but let us look where we were seven years ago. The then Prime Minister, the former Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath, used to say quite often that he had put an end to boom and bust, but we then went bust in the biggest possible way. Near enough 10 years down the line from that, we have to address how we are going to save for our future. As someone who took the decision 15 or 20 years not to pay into a pension plan, I wholeheartedly welcome what the Government are doing.

I want to provide some perspective. Unemployment is dropping in my constituency—so much so that a Labour councillor was boasting about his business and saying that he cannot get enough employees to fill the positions. The workplace pension has its place, but the LISA has a separate place. I hope that it will carry on and enable people to save for their old age.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I do not want to start by correcting the hon. Gentleman, but I am pleased to have a savings account named after me, and the LISA is most definitely a “Lee-sa” and not a “Lye-sa”. Does he agree that financial education in schools is the crux of the matter? Children must learn how to budget in order to learn how to save and have a secure relationship with their finances.

David Morris: That is part and parcel of the mix. However, this Bill is about where we are going in the future. I take on board what the hon. Lady says and I am sure that everyone else in the Chamber and in the country more widely will have done, too.

Thank you for allocating this time to me, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wholeheartedly endorse what the Government are doing.

6.55 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): We have had a number of contributions. The hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) told us about his grandparents getting to Blackpool courtesy of a jam-jar savings policy, which I thought was novel. The hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) summed up the Government’s proposals as a missed opportunity, as undermining pension savings and as not tackling the real issue. The hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), who does not
appear to be here, spoke of the diminution in the number of people with an asset base and said that, in his modest opinion, we should try to push on and get people to have a bigger asset base.

In an excellent contribution, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Mr Thomas) underlined the need for the Government to look afresh at the timescales in the Help to Save scheme and asked the Government to be more imaginative and reinforce the need to permit credit unions to participate in the scheme and the statutory right of payroll deductions of savings. The hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) gave us an enlightening exposition of his concerns that the proposal might be moving towards the death of the pension as we know it. I am not quite sure whether that was what he said, but that was the impression I got.

Richard Graham: Just to clarify, I said that the proposal risks undermining saving through a pension scheme and we do not want to do that.

Peter Dowd: I understand that clarification and I will touch on that topic in my speech.

Finally, the hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris), who supports the Government’s proposals, spoke about his experiences as a self-employed person and said that the proposal is not a supplementary pension but a means of saving.

Labour welcomes the sentiments expressed today on both sides of the House about the need to address savings overall. In general, anything that allows more people to save for the future is to be welcomed. Helping younger people and those on low incomes to save is a particularly legitimate and worthy objective, and the Government are right to consider policies to incentivise it. The majority of people on low incomes or in precarious work—categories sadly growing in Conservative Britain—are far from being in a position to save. Six years of Tory failures and austerity has led to many not knowing from where the next pound will come week in, week out. The Government’s clueless approach to exiting Europe simply compounds the problem on a macroeconomic level.

How is it possible for people to save when it is hardly possible for many to live properly on a weekly basis? How can a person save for the future when they can barely get through the day? The scandal of low retirement savings for the less well-off is an indictment on any notion of a cohesive society. One in seven pensioners live in poverty—a further 1.2 million have incomes just above the poverty line. Distributional analysis by the Women’s Budget Group shows that single female pensioners will experience a whopping 20% drop in savings for the less well-off as opposed to a pension as a result. Let me be perfectly clear: people will not be better off saving into an ISA as opposed to a workplace pension. The Committee found that

“For most employees the decision to save in a LISA instead of through a workplace pension would be detrimental to their retirement savings.”

Ian Blackford: Can the hon. Gentleman shed some light on why he thinks the Government would introduce a Bill that would make people worse off as a result of investing in an ISA than they would be if they invested in a pension? Does he not think that that is an abdication of responsibility by the Government?

Peter Dowd: The answer to the first question is that I do not know and the answer to the second is yes.

I have to give credit where credit is due, because the Conservative party has a particular talent for conjuring up political smokescreens and opportunistic gimmicks: it has given us a national living wage, which, by any stretch of the imagination, is not a living wage; we were promised a “big society”, yet the Government set about systematically undermining the notion of a cohesive society; and we were cynically assured by the late, unlamented Chancellor that we were “all in it together”. One thing I do acknowledge is that post-Brexit, given the poor performance of the Ministers responsible for negotiating it, we will all be in it together—and it won’t smell very nice. In the meantime, the Government continue unfairly and unjustly to condemn working people and vulnerable groups to pay for the Government’s failed austerity obsession—and now it is time for the Government to mess up pensions. Do they never learn from their mistakes? Are they so ideologically driven that they simply cannot admit that they get things wrong? These are mistakes. I might add, that others pay for. Have the Government not done enough damage to the prospects of hundreds of thousands of WASPI—Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign—pensions without thinking that through? Yet again, they have not thought about the potential for millions more to be affected.
When former Conservative pensions Ministers are referring to the LISA as a “Trojan horse” and warning that such “superficial attractions” will “destroy pensions”, alarm bells begin to ring on the Opposition Benches, if not on the other side of the House. Given this scenario, common sense demands ask that we ask this: are we now being presented with a savings Bill that will fundamentally undermine proper planning for pensions for the future? As many others have pointed out, the LISA is a sort of pension and not a sort of pension—it is both and not at the same time—and neither will it necessarily last for a lifetime. This seemingly opportunistic design of product risks even more pensioner poverty, which people can ill afford at any time, let alone in their later years. Moreover, the Tories’ approach of transferring responsibility and risk from the collective to individuals will not work, especially as the incomes of the poorest, the majority of whom are women, are being squeezed by public sector cuts and the roll-out of universal credit.

The Labour party is motivated and inspired by the real principle and value that we are all in it together—this is not a slogan and a soundbite, but a truism. We know that the majority of people are significantly disadvantaged by an individualised, dog-eat-dog approach, as opposed to a collective system that has fairness at its core. Today, people struggle with wages that are still lower than they were before the global financial crisis in 2008. There are now 800,000 people on zero-hours contracts and half a million people in bogus self-employment, and nearly 4 million of our children are living in poverty. Labour’s economic strategy is committed to tackling wage stagnation, particularly among those at the lower end, so that they are able and have the capacity to save for their future as well as living life now.

As the shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions has said:

“The pensions system that I want to see ensures dignity in retirement, and a proper reflection of the contribution that older people have made, and continue to make, to our society.”

Labour Members would like the Government categorically, unequivocally and clearly to assure the public that this Bill is not a veiled attack on pensions as we know them.

7.6 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Simon Kirby):

First, let me thank everyone here today for contributing to this interesting debate. As my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary said in her opening remarks, the measures contained in this Bill are really important priorities for this Government, and both Help to Save and the LISA offer people in this country a new and effective option for how they save their money. Help to Save focuses on giving more support to those on low incomes. It focuses on younger people. It is an account that will offer genuine choice and flexibility, not to mention—

Ian Blackford rose—

Simon Kirby: I will give way, but I had hoped to address the hon. Gentleman’s many comments later on.
that and still enjoy the Government bonus. We expect that a large majority of those who use the lifetime ISA will be basic rate taxpayers.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned StepChange. Well, this is what StepChange has said:

“We welcome Government recognition of the need for a savings scheme aimed at those on low incomes. Our research shows that if every household in the UK had £1,000 in rainy day savings, 500,000 would be protected from falling into problem debt.”

He also mentioned the Association of British Insurers, which said in August:

“The industry supports the Lifetime ISA as a vehicle to help people save, in addition to a workplace pension.”

I hope that is fairly clear.

My hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) asked very sensible questions and made some thoughtful points. In particular, he asked about the limit of £50 a month. Individuals saving £50 a month for four years will earn a generous bonus of £1,200. It is probably an appropriate limit for people on low incomes, at whom the scheme is targeted. There has to be a ceiling.

The hon. Member for Harrow West asked about payroll deduction. I have to thank him for a very sensible and measured contribution. There is no reason why payroll deduction cannot take place. I cannot make a commitment to him today, but I can confirm that I am happy to see whether there is more that we can do in that area.

Mr Gareth Thomas: I am grateful to the Minister for his considered response to my request for payroll deduction. Would he be willing to meet me and the Association of British Credit Unions Ltd to discuss this issue further?

Simon Kirby: Yes, I would be very happy to do that.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) for his thoughtful contribution. Clearly, he feels very strongly about a vast number of issues. I respectfully disagree with some of his opinions, but I hope that he continues to contribute to this important debate, as it is important that we get it right. At the end of the day, this is about helping younger people and poorer people get into the habit of saving.

Dr Cameron: Given that the crux of the matter is to help younger people to save, will the Minister have a dialogue with colleagues about financial education at school, and why it is really important that children and young people have a stable and secure relationship with money and that they understand that at an early age?

Simon Kirby: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady. Making sensible, correct and proper financial decisions is important for all of us throughout our lives. She has got her point in Hansard. I will also take it away with me.

Let me come back to the points raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester. There was some confusion about the factsheet of Her Majesty’s Treasury. May I make it clear that the lifetime ISA is for long-term saving, and is designed to complement pensions? Contributions to an ISA are made from post-tax income.

My hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) mentioned self-employed people. We should never forget that many people do not have this quandary about whether they should auto-enrol or go for a lifetime ISA. There are sensible self-employed people who either want to save for later life or purchase their first home. I know that the lifetime ISA scheme will be very well received by them.

Finally, I thank the hon. Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) for his contribution. I disagreed with almost everything he said, but I genuinely look forward to his continued involvement in this important area. Let us not forget that we have a responsibility to the millions of people out there—young people and poorer people—who should be saving and getting the very best assistance they can from the Government.

In conclusion, when it comes down to it, this Bill is about supporting people who are trying to save. It does not matter whether they are a young person looking for a flexible way to save for the future or if they are someone who is on a low income and are making a big effort to save up some money each month, they deserve a savings account that will support them and give them a boost on what they manage to put aside. Although these two savings vehicles are new, they are intended to do exactly that. I am pleased to commend this Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

SAVINGS (GOVERNMENT CONTRIBUTIONS) BILL (PROGRAMME)

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

That the following provisions shall apply to the Savings (Government Contributions) Bill:

Committee

(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 Tuesday 1 November 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 any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings on Consideration are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on 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 any message from the Lords) may be programmed.—(Andrew Griffiths.)

Question agreed to.

SAVINGS (GOVERNMENT CONTRIBUTIONS) 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 Savings (Government Contributions) Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:

(1) any expenditure incurred by a Minister of the Crown or a government department under or by virtue of the Act; and
any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—(Andrew Griffiths.)

Question agreed to.

SAVINGS (GOVERNMENT CONTRIBUTIONS) 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 Savings (Government Contributions) Bill, it is expedient to authorise—

(1) charges on certain withdrawals from Lifetime ISAs; and

(2) the recovery (with or without interest) of sums paid by way of government bonuses under the Act.—(Andrew Griffiths.)

Question agreed to.

Business without Debate

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Tuesday 18 October, the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on the Motion in the name of Secretary Karen Bradley relating to Broadcasting not later than 7.00pm; 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.—(Michael Ellis.)

FINANCE COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Mr Nicholas Brown be discharged from the Finance Committee and Dame Rosie Winterton be added.—(Bill Wiggin, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)

PETITIONS


7.19 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I am grateful for the chance to present a petition calling for fair transitional arrangements for 1950s-born women who are affected by changes to the state pension age. That group of women is bearing an unfair burden. When the Pensions Act 2011 was debated, Ministers promised transitional arrangements to ease that burden, but those have not materialised, leaving women in the constituency of West Dunbartonshire and many others facing hardship. I thank all those who have signed the petition and those in similar terms presented by other hon. Members. I also thank the Journal Office for all its work in registering the petitions.

The petition states:
The Petition of residents of the county constituency of West Dunbartonshire,

Declarations that as a result of the way in which the 1995 Pension Act and the 2011 Pension Act were implemented, women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age; further that hundreds of thousands of women have had significant changes imposed on them with little or no personal notice; further that implementation took place faster than promised; further that this gave no time to make alternative pension plans; and further that retirement plans have been shattered with devastating consequences.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I present a petition on behalf of the residents of South Down relating to the implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pensions Acts. The petition that I am presenting is identical to the one presented by the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes). He has already referred to the content of that petition, so I will not read it all out.

The petition states:
The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born on or after 6 April 1951 who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

The Petition of residents of South Down.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I present a petition on behalf of residents of the Motherwell and Wishaw constituency and others who kindly signed the petition while it was there in my constituency. I am grateful for the chance to present this petition calling for fair transitional arrangements for 1950s-born women affected by changes to the state pension age. The text of the petition has already been read by my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes).

I should declare an interest. I am very fortunate to have been born a year before the date that applies for the change to pension arrangements, and I feel a deep obligation to those women, some of whom came to my constituency office suffering real hardship. As a result of what has happened to them, some of them have had to apply for help from the Royal Society for the Relief of Indigent Gentlewomen of Scotland to raise their incomes.

The Petition of residents of Wishaw and Motherwell.
Ambulance Waiting Times

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[Andrew Griffiths.]

7.24 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to address the Chamber under your chairmanship, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is also a pleasure to see in his place my hon. Friend the Minister of State, Department of Health, who is a very able Minister.

My speech is not an attack on the Government per se. It is my job as the MP for South Dorset to stand up and speak for people without fear or favour. In my six years as MP, I have seen the ambulance service increasingly struggle, and I hope that any information that I impart will lead to the improvement of the service.

I pay tribute to the men and women of the ambulance service, whose professionalism, dedication and selflessness have saved countless lives. People’s ability to dial 999 in an emergency in the expectation of receiving urgent and expert medical help has long been one of the NHS’s treasures. Now, it is the ambulance service itself that is facing an emergency. In the year to May 2016, ambulance response times hit a record low. Not a single one of the 10 ambulance trusts in England met the target of reaching 75% of incidents within eight minutes.

Worryingly, the current national average for a response within eight minutes is 68%. This trend has grown over the past four years, which is the period for which the Government have published response figures.

Ambulance control rooms across the country are buckling under the twin strains of increased demand and dwindling resources. The increased demand is undeniable. Last year set a new record, with 10.8 million ambulance call-outs in 12 months—a staggering number. The London control room alone now fields 5,000 calls for ambulances every single day.

The numbers show that emergency calls for ambulances have risen by 6% year on year for 10 years. This has not been helped by the fact that people are finding it harder to see their GP, meaning that they fall back on A&E. Although we can debate the causes, the fact remains that there are simply not enough vehicles, paramedics and clinicians to cope with the increase in workload. At the same time, the resources available have been cut or frozen. Six of the 10 English ambulance service trusts are currently in deficit, having overspent their budget, despite making efficiencies. East Midlands Ambulance Service NHS Trust alone had a £12 million deficit last year.

In my constituency, efficiency savings have directly affected the South Western Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust, which I shall refer to from now on as the trust. An ambulance call-out in the trust now costs 2.5% less than last year. The trust covers Bath and north-east Somerset, Bristol, Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, Devon, Dorset, Gloucestershire and South Gloucestershire, Somerset, Swindon and Wiltshire—a huge predominantly rural land mass covering 20% of England. I highlight the trust’s area of responsibility because it is the most rural of all the ambulance trusts and the area is one of the most sparsely populated, which means longer distances, higher fuel costs, patients who are harder to locate and hospitals that are more spread out. This means that ambulances need to be parked at intervals across the region, as I see all the time.

Achieving response times and meeting budget targets under such circumstances is a challenge. It is not just the increased demand and reduced resources that are creating the problems; the target culture does not help. Though well intended, targets can skew both priorities and outcomes. For example, to meet target times, a fast-response paramedic on a motorbike or in a car might be sent to a critical incident that would almost certainly require ambulance transportation to hospital.

Those red-category incidents include life-threatening emergencies such as cardiac arrest, where survival depends on swift and specific action. Sending the wrong resource in such a case might well tick the target box on response times, but the eventual outcome might not be so satisfactory. For example, if responders reach a patient only one second short of the eight minutes, it is considered a success, even if that patient dies.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this matter to the House. In 2014-15, the Northern Ireland Ambulance Service met its eight-minute deadline in only 60% of cases. Such problems beset all of us across the United Kingdom—here on the mainland and in Northern Ireland. Does he agree that it may be time to share those experiences and ideas about how we can make things better across the United Kingdom? If we can do that together, yes, see what improvements we can make, we will all benefit.

Richard Drax: I entirely concur. As I said at the start of my speech, I am not here to condemn the Government, because they have the most appalling situation to deal with, given rising costs and all the things we know about the health service. Yes, more integrated systems, which the Government are working on, are definitely part of this. As I will say at the end of my speech—perhaps I will say it now—we really ought to think about the whole NHS and how it is run, not just the ambulance service. We need to do that free of politicians, with expert advice being sought from non-politicians—those who know how the health system works, not least the clinicians—so that we can re-look at this whole situation. We have enough money, but we have not spent it particularly wisely in every case.

Let me just go back to my example—you might well have lost the thread, Madam Deputy Speaker—about the target times for red-category incidents. I was saying that if responders reach a patient only one second short of the eight-minute target, it is considered a success, even if that patient dies. Conversely, it is deemed a failure if a patient lives, but help has arrived just one second over the eight-minute response time. Worse, the trust is marked down for it.

Once at the hospital, ambulance crews face yet another target: they must hand over their patient to the emergency department within 15 minutes. Anything over 30 minutes incurs a fine, although it is not applied to all areas and is capped by the trust’s commissioners. Yet, handovers can be achieved only if there are available beds and bays in the emergency department, which in turn can free up space only by transferring patients to wards or into surgery. That flow—from ambulance to emergency department to ward and, hopefully, to home and recovery—simply
is not happening, because beds are not being cleared. The so-called bed blockers—the chronically ill and often elderly patients— languish in hospital beds because there simply is nowhere else for them to go. Without enough community care outside the hospital to discharge them to safely, there is no alternative, and so if the wards are full—they often are—there is gridlock. Regrettably, we have all become accustomed to the sight of ambulances lined up outside the emergency department with their crews tending to their patients until they can be handed over. In August this year, ambulances delivered patients to the Royal Bournemouth hospital’s emergency department 650 times. The 30-minute handover target time was breached 91 times, and in eight cases patients waited for more than two hours.

It is perhaps not surprising that ambulance crews feel demotivated and demoralised, and A&E staff are equally under pressure. They are all attempting to do their best—everyone recognises that—but perhaps that is in a system that sets them up to fail. Unsurprisingly, the attrition rate in the ambulance service in England is running at 11% a year, leading to each ambulance service having to replace more than one in 10 of its call handlers, drivers, clinicians or paramedics. I am told that these invaluable, experienced professionals eventually buckle under the physical and emotional demands of their jobs, often leaving for the better hours, conditions and pay offered by GP surgeries and clinics. The retention of staff is notoriously difficult in A&E departments, too, for similar reasons. A recruitment crisis now faces the ambulance service and A&E departments. Yet, for these most dedicated and professional workers, without whom the NHS would grind to a halt, there is little light on the horizon. Instead, extraordinarily, fines are imposed on the cash-strapped services employing them.

Hold-ups from ambulance to A&E represent a waste of precious resources; in the trust’s area, that amounts to a staggering 5,000 hours per month, and the south-west’s hospitals are by no means the worst performing in England. For that reason, the trust and the Yorkshire and west midlands ambulance services have been trialling a new response programme. The aim is to get the right resource to the right incident first time. Rather than sending a response vehicle to meet a target, more time is taken to identify the reason for the call-out. Something that is life-threatening, such as strokes and heart attacks, will inevitably need an ambulance transfer to hospital, whereas a less serious case can be dealt with by a paramedic. Members might have thought that that sounds like common sense, but it seems to me, and I think to many, that targets, in part, get in the way of common sense. Sheffield University will report on the results of the programme. Interestingly, Wales is already using the system, with a 75% success rate, and Scotland is starting trials now.

Inevitably, waiting times for ambulances are increasing as pressures mount. Regrettably, there are consequences for the patient and, of course, their family and friends. Less well known are the physical and verbal assaults on ambulance staff. In the trust’s area alone, those have doubled in 12 months—that situation is, I am told, untenable. Death threats have been made to control room staff, while physical injuries have included a broken jaw and a career-ending attack with a baseball bat. Often, drink and drugs are to blame; sometimes, mental health issues, pain, sheer anxiety and frustration make relatives and friends lash out. I am not, for one second, condoning that behaviour—but I am just trying to explain it. I have some experience of this with constituents who are devastated when they do not get the emergency response they expect—when we dial 999, we do indeed expect a speedy response.

Ambulance service staff are united in calling for a formal, ongoing public information campaign that tells the public not only when to call an ambulance but what to expect when one is called. With the number of calls continually outstripping the number of ambulances available, expectations need to be managed. I would be grateful if the Minister expanded a little on that when he answers. By way of example, in Dorset and across the whole trust area, 58%—nearly 60%—of 999 calls do not result in patients being sent to A&E at all, and 14% of callers are treated and advised over the phone.

Calls to make funding for ambulance services and A&E a special case chime with calls for increased social care provision to free up beds in hospitals so that a flow can be re-established. That is particularly important in Dorset and the south-west, where so many pensioners choose to live. I would like to share some observations from Mrs Fiona Smith, who is the manager of Milton Court sheltered housing in Poole, which is not in my constituency. Her charges, who are all in their 80s and 90s, live independently and successfully in their own homes, with support services provided by the company. If they suffer heart attacks or strokes, the ambulance arrives within 10 minutes, she says, but if they fall down, the importance of the incident is downgraded by call handlers due to immense pressure from other incidents. Mrs Smith recently waited for more than four hours with a frail 96-year-old lady who remained lying on the floor with a broken hip because protocols would not allow staff to lift her. Mrs Smith is at pains to point out that she is not criticising the ambulance staff; she simply believes that there is insufficient funding and staff. Her advice to me and the Government, and to others, is that we need to get our priorities right.

I know there is no short-term solution to the picture I have painted, and I sympathise enormously with the Government’s plight. In the past, Governments of all colours ha ve had this massive problem, which is growing as the population gets older and lives longer, and the cost of medical care rises. More joined-up care is one way forward, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) suggested. I praise the clinical commissioning group in Dorset, which is working with all GPs and hospitals to try to ensure that a more joined-up care approach is working. I believe that that is happening across the country, and I am sure the Minister will expand on that. This is a vital way forward that will solve some of the problems.

Perhaps, as I hinted—I do not know whether the Minister can expand on this—we need to re-examine the whole NHS, rather than just picking on particular bits of it. Now and in the past, when politicians and Secretaries of State sometimes feel that that things need to be done—and they do—they unfortunately fail to look at the whole picture. This is not a criticism of our current Secretary of State, for whom I have high regard; I think he is doing an extremely good job in difficult
circumstances. However, perhaps now is the time—as we see, to a certain extent, the writing on the wall and the warning signs flashing—for us to sit down and have another look at how the NHS is run. I leave that point with the Minister and his Department. I can only recommend that politicians are kept out of that debate until such time as ideas are put forward to us, because inevitably we would have to make the final decisions.

I end as I began by praising the staff of the ambulance service in the south-west, not least those who serve us in South Dorset and do a fantastic job. I have met many of them and cannot praise them enough. I now look to the Minister to expand on what I have said in the hope that there is some light at the end of the tunnel, and perhaps a little more money at the bottom of the bucket.

7.42 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): It is a pleasure, Madam Deputy Speaker, to join you a little earlier than anticipated and to have you in your place presiding over this important debate.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Dorset (Richard Drax) on securing the debate. I am grateful for this opportunity to discuss ambulance response times and to put on the record, as he did, my thanks to all those who work in ambulance services across the country, not just in the south-west. Ambulance services are a vital part of the healthcare system and provide rapid assistance to people in urgent need of help. We are all united in expressing our gratitude to them for the professional work that they do.

I acknowledge that the NHS is busier than ever. That is why we are backing the NHS’s future plan with an extra £10 billion by 2020-21, providing some of the funding that my hon. Friend referred to. Friend concluded his remarks by calling for. The ambulance service is experiencing unprecedented demand in all parts of the United Kingdom, including, as we heard from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), in Northern Ireland. It is delivering over 3,400 more emergency journeys every day in England than in 2010. In the past year, calls to ambulance services in England rose by 400,000 from 9 million in 2014-15 to 9.4 million in the year ending in April. Including calls transferred from NHS 111, ambulance services deal with more than 10 million 999 calls every year.

The demands currently being placed on ambulance trusts mean that performance targets have been, and continue to be, under pressure. South Western Ambulance Service NHS Foundation Trust has seen a particularly sharp increase in demand for its services. In the year to date, there have been 11% more calls in the south-west than at the same time last year. These calls have led to over 1,800 face-to-face responses by the service, on average, each and every day. In June this year, the Care Quality Commission inspected the service, and recently published the report of its findings. Overall, the trust has been awarded a rating of “requires improvement”. Within this rating, there were some positive findings. In particular, the trust was rated as outstanding for being a caring service, and the majority of feedback from patients about their individual experiences was favourable. However, it was also deemed to require improvement for its emergency operations centres, emergency and urgent care, and patient transport services, on which my hon. Friend focused.

I am sure my hon. Friend will be pleased to know that we are undertaking a range of initiatives to meet these challenges. Sir Bruce Keogh’s review of the NHS urgent and emergency care system is tackling the root causes of demand. Under that review, ambulance services will be transformed into mobile treatment centres. As a result of significant advances in technology in recent years, an ambulance presenting at a patient’s home, or to wherever it is called to treat them, is in a far better position to provide more care without, in many cases, the need to transfer them to hospital. There is greater use at the front end of “hear and treat”, which closes calls with advice over the phone, and “see and treat”, which treats patients on the scene without onward conveyance. This is all happening as a result of the greater integration with the rest of the health system that my hon. Friend called for. The CQC recognised the trust as one of the highest performing in England on “hear and treat”, which enables clinicians to assess and triage patients over the telephone and close the call without the need to send an ambulance.

As part of the wider review, under the ambulance response programme that my hon. Friend mentioned, NHS England is exploring ways in which to change responses to 999 calls by ambulance service to help improve patient outcomes and help ambulance services better to manage demand. The first element of the ARP is “dispatch on disposition”, which was first piloted in London and in my hon. Friend’s local trust area in the south-west. “Dispatch on disposition” gives call handlers more time to make a clinical assessment of 999 calls that are not immediately life threatening, ensuring that the most appropriate response, based on clinical need, is sent to each incident first time. Early analysis shows benefits for patients from “dispatch on disposition”, and I have recently accepted advice from NHS England to extend this pilot to all trusts to help inform the independent evaluation.

My hon. Friend focused much of his speech on his, I think, personal aversion to targets, and on some of the perverse consequences that can arise. Under the second phase of the programme, we are piloting new clinical codes in ambulance services in Yorkshire, the west midlands and the south-west. The codes are used by ambulance services to determine the appropriate response for each emergency call they receive. The trial seeks to ensure clinically appropriate responses to each presenting condition while making the best use of our ambulance resources.

The programme has clinical leadership at its heart and will be independently evaluated by the School of Health and Related Research at the University of Sheffield, which my hon. Friend acknowledged. The evaluation report will be laid before Parliament once the Secretary of State has made a decision on whether any changes are needed to the ambulance standards. The most seriously ill patients will continue to receive an eight-minute response under the programme, and a pre-triage system is being used to ensure that life-threatening cases are identified quickly and efficiently. Good progress continues to be made with the programme and NHS England will make recommendations to Ministers in due course.

Richard Drax: My hon. Friend is very generous in giving way, especially after I had so much time. I have just one question. Yes, my natural instinct is against targets; I do not like them, but I understand why we
have to have them. When ambulance trusts or hospitals are fined for not meeting targets, would it not be more logical to look into the reason why and ask the executives, whoever they may be, to sort it out? If they cannot do so, can we then sack them? If the conclusion is that it is a matter of giving more money to help towards achieving the target, obviously it should be given.

Mr Dunne: My hon. Friend will be aware that the clinical commissioning groups around the country commission services from ambulance trusts. I am sure he will have looked into the experience of the CCG in his constituency to see whether it believes it is getting the service that his constituents and its patients require. I can speak for my area, where a change to the disposition of response vehicles, particularly ambulances, was proposed by the ambulance service. A trial period took place, and the CCG was persuaded that it needed to provide more money to the ambulance service to fund additional crews to improve coverage. It is specific to individual areas, but CCGs need to work with ambulance trusts to ensure that the relevant standards are achieved.

The South Western Ambulance Service established an action plan in response to the CQC report to identify activities to improve its performance and demonstrate the benefits of the ARP, including addressing staffing and fleet requirements, and working with A&E departments in hospitals to which it conveys.

My hon. Friend made some startling observations about the challenges and consequences of extended handover times, and his examples were instructive. It is clearly a problem when ambulance crews are unable to discharge their patients into emergency departments as efficiently as they would like. NHS Improvement is working with local commissioners and trusts to tackle those problems, including handover delays, when they present a continuing problem. The amount of time lost to handover delays at hospitals is a significant concern in the south-west service, as he indicated. He mentioned an aggregate figure. The figure I have is that, on average, 60 hours per day were lost to handover delays in August 2016. In July, a regional workshop was run by the CCG to persuade the South Western Ambulance Service, acute providers and commissioners. A set of actions to address handover delays were agreed upon and a plan to implement them is being developed. Hopefully he will see the benefit of that shortly.

We recognise that there is currently a shortage of paramedics nationally. As my hon. Friend mentioned, the south-west area is no exception. A number of initiatives are being implemented to address that, from recruitment campaigns for ambulance staff and paramedics, to training schemes to upskill the existing workforce. In the CQC report, it found that South Western Ambulance Service has an appropriate mix of skills to provide a safe service, and that, where staff numbers are below planned levels, the trust is making good efforts to recruit new staff.

At the end of September, there were 1,568 ambulance paramedics at the South Western Ambulance Service, almost double the number of ambulance paramedics there in 2010. That is an impressive achievement, but there remains a vacancy rate at the trust of just over 3%, equivalent to 134 members of full-time staff. Health Education England is working with the College of Paramedics and has invested more than £2 million in a two-year paramedic pre-degree pilot, through which potential paramedic students are recruited into roles providing structured care in urgent and emergency care settings. Health Education England is also providing funding to ambulance services to invest in their existing workforce, train ambulance technicians to become paramedics, and upskill paramedics to advanced or specialist paramedic level.

In the south-west, Health Education England has provided £350,000 in funding to help retain staff so that they stay longer than my hon. Friend indicated they have in the past, and to improve engagement and provide the opportunity to train with the very latest equipment. I am pleased to note that 100% of the trust’s rapid response vehicles and dual-crew ambulances are funded to have a paramedic on board. In the six months to May 2016 there was, on average, a paramedic on almost 92% of all A&E conveying vehicles. The service is approaching the level for which it is funded, and I hope those initiatives ensure that there are sufficient paramedics to hit that 100% target.

In addition, to help to reduce system pressures, NHS England is undertaking a public information campaign about urgent care services. My hon. Friend urged us to do that to encourage the public to present at the right place and do the right thing. In particular, he referred to the use of NHS 111 as a front door to the integrated urgent care system to help improve its credibility as the place to get initial advice, rather than people dialling 999.

To conclude, I again emphasise that ambulance services are vital to emergency care and the NHS as a whole. We all want to be sure that, where loved ones suffer heart attacks or are involved in a serious accident, they will not be left waiting for medical help to arrive. The initiatives being taken in response to the record demand facing the urgent and emergency care system will ensure that patients continue to receive the quality care that they need.

My hon. Friend concluded his remarks by asking for a new approach to the integration of NHS services, to which I would add the integration of NHS services with social care services. He could have been describing the sustainability and transformation plans that are currently being finalised by health areas across the country for presentation to NHS England by the end of this week. They are bottom-up plans prepared by clinicians and senior management within NHS organisations alongside local authority organisations responsible for social care, which is precisely what my hon. Friend called for. I am pleased to say that, under this Government, that is being delivered.

Question put and agreed to.

7.58 pm
House adjourned.
House of Commons

Tuesday 18 October 2016

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Kashmir

1. Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the political and security situation in Kashmir. [906637]

2. Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): What recent diplomatic steps the Government have taken to support resolution of the conflict in Kashmir. [906649]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Alok Sharma): I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Jason McCartney) cares deeply about Kashmir and has visited the region. I am concerned by recent events in Kashmir. I have in recent weeks met representatives from the Governments of both India and Pakistan and urged calm and restraint on both sides. I will continue to do so.

Jason McCartney: Has the Minister seen the reports of hundreds of Kashmiri protesters suffering eye injuries because of the indiscriminate use of pellet guns, and will he please speak out against it?

Alok Sharma: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I am of course concerned by those reports. He may also know that the use of pellet guns in Kashmir has come under review by the Government of India. The results of that review have not yet been shared publicly, but it has been indicated that alternative methods of crowd control will be introduced.

Kelvin Hopkins: The tragic recent history of Kashmir arose from the partition of India, which was managed by Britain after world war two. Does not Britain therefore have a special responsibility to help to find a solution to Kashmir’s troubles and the suffering of the Kashmiri people?

Alok Sharma: The UK of course has very good relations with both India and Pakistan, but our long-standing position, held by successive Governments of all hues, is that it is for India and Pakistan to find a lasting resolution to the situation, taking into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people. It is not for the UK to prescribe a solution or act as mediator.

Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): There are no winners in Kashmir. The recent clashes have impacted on thousands of people and the economy is struggling, with over £1 million or 10,000 crore being lost in 100 days. A military solution is not working. I urge the Minister to encourage a political solution that involves not only India and Pakistan, but the Kashmiris themselves.

Alok Sharma: We should of course do all we can to promote trade and prosperity in the region, and that of course follows stability.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): As has been stated, in Kashmir we have seen more than 100 civilians killed, hundreds blinded and over 13,000 injured through the indiscriminate use of pellet guns against protesters. Will the Minister today condemn this shocking abuse of human rights? Does he not believe that we, as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, have a responsibility to support and uphold UN resolution 47 and allow the sons and daughters of Kashmir their birth right to self-determination?

Alok Sharma: As I have noted, I am of course concerned by reports of the use of pellet guns, and of course any allegations of human rights abuses should be investigated thoroughly, promptly and transparently.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Will the Minister speak to officials at No. 10 and urge the Prime Minister to raise this issue during her forthcoming visit to India?

Alok Sharma: The UK of course shares a long-standing and deep friendship with India, and I am delighted that the Prime Minister has announced that she will visit India in November. The visit will be an important opportunity to discuss the full range of bilateral issues with Prime Minister Modi.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): The previous Foreign Secretary said in March that the question of Kashmir should be a precondition for the resumption of talks between India and Pakistan. Since then, Kashmir has seen more than 100 days of unrest and the exchange of artillery fire between Pakistan and India. What specifically is the Foreign Secretary doing to bring about an end to the violence and to assist in the resumption of talks?

Alok Sharma: As I have said, of course we have very good relations with both India and Pakistan, including strong diaspora links. They are two proud nations. We encourage both countries to maintain good relations but, as I have noted, we recognise that the pace of progress is for both sides to determine.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): With both India and Pakistan facing immense issues in their own countries to sort out, one would have thought that there would be an appetite to resolve this issue. Why does the Minister think that actually that appetite does not seem to exist in either country?
Alok Sharma: This is of course a very important matter, and we raise these issues with both Governments. Ultimately, however, it is for both sides to progress the issue and determine the outcome.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): On behalf of the Opposition, I associate myself with the Minister’s remarks. The recent upsurge in violent clashes and terrorist attacks in Kashmir is deeply disturbing. We urge all sides to engage in dialogue, halt the cycle of violence and keep innocent civilians from harm. We have heard today about the use of pellet guns against protesters in Kashmir, which is totally unacceptable. Will the Minister and the Secretary of State urge the Indian authorities to make good on their commitment to stop the use of those weapons?

Alok Sharma: As I have noted on a number of occasions, the use of pellet guns in Kashmir has come under review by the Government of India, and our understanding is that alternative methods of crowd control will be introduced.

Russian Federation

2. Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the UK’s relations with the Russian Federation. [906638]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): Of course it is right that the UK and the Russian Federation should continue to co-operate and to engage in all the areas where we have common interests, but in view of the ruthless and brutal behaviour of the Russians in Ukraine and in Syria, I hope the House will agree that it is right that the UK should be in the lead in keeping the pressure on sanctions, and it cannot be business as usual with Russia.

Chris Bryant: I agree. Putin’s behaviour has been despicable: murdering his own opponents—assassinating political opponents such as Boris Nemtsov—as well as the invasion of Georgia and Crimea, and now the despicable behaviour in Syria, where he tries to draw a moral equivalence between British and American bombing of military installations run by Daesh and Russia’s and Assad’s bombing of innocent civilians in hospitals in Aleppo. This is immoral. I am not sure that demonstrations outside the Russian embassy will make any odds, but it cannot be business as usual with Russia.

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend is of course absolutely right to say that the vacuum left by the decision of, I am afraid, this House and, indeed, the Obama Administration in 2013 not to oppose the Assad regime has allowed the Russians to move into that space. It is vital that we keep up the pressure not just with sanctions but with the threat of justice in the International Criminal Court.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): Is it not unfortunate that, in Russia itself, print and social media are being gagged? Hence the reason I have little sympathy for the complaints made today by Russia Today, which is undoubtedly a form of propaganda constantly used by Putin and his gang. What is now happening as far as the media are concerned is surely the same as happened under communism and, before that, tsarism: repression at home, and hostility and aggression abroad.

Boris Johnson: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I noted the decision of NatWest bank to withdraw support for RT. That was a wholly independently taken decision. I wish to assure the House, in spite of what we may have heard this morning from Moscow, that the things we are doing to promote free and fair information in Russia is, of course, to support the BBC World Service.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Oleg Sentsov is a Ukrainian film maker imprisoned for 20 years in Russia for his pro-Ukrainian views. Will the Government send a strong message to the Russian Government condemning Sentsov’s imprisonment and demanding his immediate release?

Boris Johnson: We are indeed concerned by the number of Ukrainian nationals who have voiced their opposition to what has happened—the illegal annexation of Crimea—and who face lengthy jail sentences, including Mr Sentsov and Mr Oleksandr Kolchenko. We are appealing to the Russian authorities to release them immediately.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): Last March, President Putin was praised for his ruthless clarity in retaking Palmyra. By August, the Foreign Secretary had said that he wanted to normalise relationships with Russia, and last week he called for the people to demonstrate outside the Russian embassy in London. Where is the political consistency, and how does this approach build trust in the diplomatic community?

Boris Johnson: I think the House will have heard very clearly that on matters where we can co-operate with Russia it is absolutely vital that we do so. On the point about demonstrating outside the Russian embassy, I merely draw attention to the paradox and the peculiarity that the Stop the War Coalition has never seen fit to demonstrate against the barbarism taking place in Aleppo.
Sir Edward Leigh: Will the Foreign Secretary take this opportunity to welcome the visit this week of Patriarch Kirill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church, who is meeting the Queen? I know a bit about Russian Orthodoxy, having been married within the Church. The Russian Orthodox Church has suffered appallingly, particularly in Soviet times, but it is growing now. This is an opportunity for the Foreign Secretary to make it clear that whatever our differences with the Russian Government at the moment, we have absolutely nothing but support for the Russian people and her faith, and their perseverance in times of trial.

Boris Johnson: I defer to my hon. Friend’s knowledge of the Russian Orthodox Church. It is important that we keep open all lines of communication. Archbishop Kirill may have some interesting points to make. It would be even more important if he took back a message from the UK that we do not tolerate what is happening in Crimea, in eastern Ukraine, and, above all, in Syria. I hope that his visit will be a factor for change in the Kremlin.

EU Referendum

3. Lucy Allan (Telford): What recent discussions he has had with his international counterparts on the outcome of the EU referendum.

8. Chris Law (Dundee West): What recent discussions he has had with his counterparts in other European countries on the timetable for the UK leaving the EU.

10. Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire): What recent discussions he has had with his international counterparts on the outcome of the EU referendum.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): Since becoming Foreign Secretary, I have engaged with many of my counterparts across Europe and beyond, including partners as far afield as Turkey and Japan. Those discussions have of course touched on the outcome of the referendum and the Government’s plans to enact the result.

Lucy Allan: My right hon. Friend kindly visited my constituency last year, so he will know that there are many Japanese employers in Telford. Will he please tell the House what assurances he has given to his Japanese counterpart that post-Brexit global Britain is still a great place to do business?

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend will know that since the referendum result there has been a £24 billion investment from Japan in this country from SoftBank alone, and Japanese investment continues to come into this country. I think that all Japanese investors, and indeed investors around the world, can be secure in the knowledge that we will get the best possible deal for goods and services that will allow their companies to flourish and to prosper in this country as never before.

Chris Law: The Secretary of State will be aware that the timetable for leaving is triggering instability and uncertainty in the economy, so much so that the Cabinet is considering spending billions to keep single market access for the City of London. What is the timetable for the same support to be applied to Scotland, where 62% of us voted to remain?

Boris Johnson: The people of Scotland obviously had a referendum in 2014 and voted convincingly to remain in the United Kingdom. This was a United Kingdom decision. We will continue the negotiations as a United Kingdom, and we will get a fantastic deal for this country and a strong deal for the EU—both a strong UK and a strong EU.

Alberto Costa: The Honourable Luigi Di Maio, the deputy speaker of the Italian chamber of deputies, whom my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough and I met three weeks ago, confirmed in yesterday’s edition of The Times that Britain should retain access to the single market and control its migrants. Will the Foreign Secretary reciprocate by confirming on Italian media the welcome comments made by the Honourable Luigi Di Maio? Will he also confirm that Italians continue to be welcome across the United Kingdom?

Boris Johnson: Tutti gli italiani sono benvenuti a Londra.

Chris Bryant: Not allowed!

Boris Johnson: I am sorry—forgive me.

I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for his question. I think that Rai TV has been requesting an interview with me for some time on this matter, and that is the most ingenious interview application I have yet heard. I will certainly do what I can to assist. Italians and all nationals from EU member states can have the assurance that their status here will of course be protected, provided that there is symmetry and reciprocity on the other side.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter): When the Secretary of State met John Kerry recently, did he have the opportunity to discuss the American chamber of commerce report, which will apparently land in the Cabinet Office this week and which warns that American companies with $600 billion-worth of investment in Britain are currently reviewing the situation because of uncertainty about our future unfettered access to the single market? Next time the Brexit Sub-Committee of the Cabinet meets, will the Secretary of State support the Chancellor in standing up to the hard Brexiteers, who seem to want to do such untold damage to our economy?

Boris Johnson: I have not yet seen the American chamber of commerce report because, by the right hon. Gentleman’s own account, it has not yet been published. I have no doubt that American companies, in common with all companies around the world outside the UK and the EU, will find the UK in future an even better place to invest in and to bring their corporations to, because of the natural advantages of time zone, language and skills that this country enjoys.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay): Given that the 170-odd countries outside the EU successfully trade with it—some have trade deals and some do not—what does the Secretary of State have to say to those pessimists and remoaners who continue to believe
that we, with the fifth largest economy in the world, cannot thrive outside the EU, particularly given his additional list of suggestions and the fact that business costs are relative and it costs a lot more to do business on the continent?

Boris Johnson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I deprecate the terms “pessimists”, “gloomadon-poppers” and “remoaners”. We are all in this together and everybody wants to make a great success of Brexit. I have no doubt at all that this country will be able to do a fantastic deal with our friends and partners in the European Union, and simultaneously become even more attractive to investors from around the world, with a new series of stunning free trade agreements.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): How does the Foreign Secretary explain to his counterparts his support for Turkey’s accession to the European Union, since that was used by the Brexiteers as a reason for getting the UK out? Did he campaign for Turkey’s accession in order to get the UK out, or did he campaign for the UK to get out in order to support Turkey’s accession?

Boris Johnson: The right hon. Gentleman will know, because we had a debate on this very subject during the course of the referendum campaign, that I am a passionate advocate of Turkish membership of the EU, if that is indeed what the Turks want—sometimes they seem to change their minds these days—always provided that the UK has left before that day.

Alex Salmond: I have here an article written by the Foreign Secretary—I think there is only one of this one—in which he argues, immediately after the referendum campaign, for full participation in the single marketplace. If it was okay for the leader of the Brexiteers to argue for full participation in the single marketplace after the referendum, why is it not okay for people on this side of the House to try to force that issue to a vote in the House of Commons?

Boris Johnson: The right hon. Gentleman will know full well that it is completely unrealistic to expect the Government to put their negotiating position to a vote in this House before those negotiations are concluded. That has never happened before. I remember all sorts of negotiations on Maastricht and other European treaties, and they were never put to this House before they were concluded, as he knows full well.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): There has been reference to the draft newspaper column in favour of remain that the Secretary of State wrote in February. He wrote:

“This is a market on our doorstep, ready for further exploitation by British firms...Why are we so determined to turn our back on it?”

The argument he made back then is exactly why we on this side of the House are so concerned about a hard Brexit that would put our access to the market at risk and risk the jobs of British people. Why does the Secretary of State no longer agree with himself?

Boris Johnson: Most people will understand that the arguments have moved on and that the people have spoken overwhelmingly. Indeed, one of the most powerful cases that could possibly have been made for leave was to be found in the article that I wrote for remain. Everybody who has read it has told me that they emerged from it feeling a profound sense of obligation to leave the European Union, and they were quite right. That analysis, I am afraid, is absolutely justified and I am delighted that the people voted accordingly.

Syria

4. Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): What progress has he made on diplomatic negotiations with his counterparts in countries bordering Syria to allow (a) aid to reach refugees and (b) refugees to leave safely.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): We support the UN’s response to the Syria crisis and its regional impact. We have allocated £1.1 billion to Syria’s neighbours to help them to meet their humanitarian obligations, while maintaining border security. We work closely with them to provide humanitarian aid, as well as job and education opportunities for refugees.

Thangam Debbonaire: An estimated 75,000 to 100,000 refugees, mostly women and children, are trapped without food and with little aid in the Berm, an area of no man’s land on the Syrian-Jordanian border. Given that Jordan already has thousands of refugees, if the next military target is to be Raqqa, the capital of ISIS, with an inevitable further flow of refugees towards the Jordanian border, what will the Foreign Secretary do to assist Jordan now and in the future?

Boris Johnson: We are in regular contact with the Jordanian authorities to assist the humanitarian situation in the Berm. We are one of the biggest deliverers of aid to the area. In recent months we have had meetings on several occasions with the Government of Jordan to try to address growing concerns about conditions, and I know that the Prime Minister has raised that.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): One of the many barriers to creating safe routes out of Syria is the Syrian Government’s practice of declaring stolen passports belonging to those who oppose them. Will the Foreign Secretary, as a matter of some urgency, speak to his colleague the Home Secretary about the position of Zaina Erhaim, an award-winning Syrian journalist who recently had her passport confiscated as she came into Heathrow?

Boris Johnson: I am aware of the case. It is very difficult, because we must, in law, confiscate passports that have been stolen, but we are doing what we can to assist the lady in question.¹

¹[Official Report, 8 November 2016, Vol. 616, c. 4MC.]
Boris Johnson: The reality is that no such proposal can conceivably be made to work in the absence of a cessation of hostilities by the Russians and the Assad regime. That is the precondition. A durable and convincing ceasefire must be delivered by the Assad regime before any such proposal can conceivably be made to work.

Somalia

5. Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): What recent assessment has he made of the security situation in Somalia; and if he will make a statement. [906641]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I visited Mogadishu in August and was pleased to see that after decades of civil war and transitional governance, Somalia is now making significant and remarkable progress. However, security and governance need to improve; and al-Shabaab is far from defeated.

Sir Henry Bellingham: The Foreign Office deserves great credit for making us the only EU country to reopen its embassy in Mogadishu, as announced in the Anglo-Somali summit in February 2012 at Lancaster House. Does the Minister agree that now that al-Shabaab has been pushed out of Mogadishu and other cities such as Kismayo and Baidoa, it is essential that local government structures are built up so that communities can be properly represented? What is the Foreign Office doing to help that?

Mr Ellwood: First, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for organising, as former Africa Minister, the very conference that he mentioned on Somalia in 2012, which helped to galvanise international support for Somalia. He is absolutely right. We need to work on the governance structures, and a federated model has come to the fore. We need to support the AMISOM troops as well. There is much work to be done. Although al-Shabaab has been pushed out of the capital cities, it is still in the south of the country.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): While considering the security situation in Somalia, how does the Minister assess the role of Ethiopia, and what impact is the continued detention of British citizen Andy Tsege having on our relations with the Ethiopian regime?

Mr Ellwood: I am aware of the state of emergency that Ethiopia has introduced, and I will certainly look at the consular case that the hon. Gentleman raises and perhaps write to him with more details. However, I would pass on congratulations to Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and the other countries that are providing forces and making an important contribution to the support and stability of Somalia.

Aleppo Bombings

6. Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What representations he has made to his Russian counterparts on the bombings of civilian areas and humanitarian aid convoys in Aleppo. [906642]

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): I met Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov in New York on 21 September, which was two days after the bombing of the aid convoy, and we obviously focused on Syria in those discussions. As I have told the House already, I pressed him to do what I think the world wants Russia to do, which is to bring pressure to bear on the Assad regime to have a ceasefire.

Dr Huq: The Foreign Secretary may not be its biggest fan, but even the European Council yesterday found that Russia’s use of chemical weapons and its targeting of civilians are war crimes. Having now distanced himself from demos at the embassy, will he make sure that the UK leads in advocating UN veto restraint, because as long as Russia has such a “get out of jail free” card, resolutions will be ignored and an appalling situation will get worse?

Boris Johnson: The hon. Lady will be interested to know that at that European Council—I participated in it fully and, if I may say so, happily, because we are still fully paid-up members—the UK delegation introduced language specifically targeting Russia and took out language seeking to create a false equivalence between Russia and the US.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend remember that in 2005, Her Majesty’s Government, along with every other member of the General Assembly of the United Nations, signed up to the responsibility to protect? Having just voted to take back control in this country, is it not appalling that we are bowing down to a bully in the middle east who, instead of taking seriously their responsibility to protect, is brutalising and murdering millions of people in Syria?

Boris Johnson: My hon. Friend is quite right. As you will appreciate, Mr Speaker, the UK has been in the lead in the UN Security Council in bringing pressure to bear on Russia not just on its use of chemical weapons, but on its continuing refusal to get the Syrian regime to have a ceasefire. Furthermore, we are in the lead in trying to bring all responsible parties to the International Criminal Court.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op): In response to this and other atrocities, the Foreign Secretary said in the Commons last week that “more kinetic options” should be considered, but then only the day before yesterday, emerging from his talks, he said there was little interest, to say the least. Please will he reassure the House that the UK will play its full role in urging other nations to accept that that may be the only way to make Russia back down?

Boris Johnson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, and I have to say that I admire his spirit and the urgency that he has brought to this debate. I think the mood is certainly changing in this country. I do not yet detect a sufficient appetite in the capitals of the west, and certainly not yet in the White House, for the kind of action that I think could be useful, but, as Secretary Kerry said, nothing is “off the table”.

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Trade with Africa

7. Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for International Trade on promoting trade with Africa during and after the process of the UK leaving the EU.

Mr Ellwood: I suggest to the SNP that they understand where we are now. The result is there and Brexit is where we are—that has been made clear already. We now have an opportunity to embrace it and go to those countries and sign deals. That is where we should be, not looking through the small print to ask why we cannot do any of those things.

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): From the Gambia to South Africa, the Commonwealth offers great potential for expanding trade with Africa. Will the Minister make sure that we make full use of those opportunities to secure trade deals and get exporting to those emerging economies?

Mr Ellwood: When trade opportunities arise, it is not simply just having companies that want to work there, it is also the element of trust that exists between the two nations. Our legacy, heritage and history—and the trust that exists—are exactly what we need to leverage, as well as the wonderful companies that we have to provide support across a wide range of sectors.

Iraq

9. Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with his (a) Iraqi and (b) other international counterparts on the political situation in Iraq.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I met the Iraqi Foreign Minister, Dr Ibrahim al-Jaafari, last week here in London at the Iraq-UK bilateral forum. The Foreign Secretary and I met other Foreign and Defence Ministers at the Washington conference on defeating Daesh held in the summer.

Stephen Metcalfe: As my hon. Friend will know, the Kurdistan regional government has, for a long time, been short-changed—if not cut off completely—by the Government in Baghdad. Although there are some promising signs, Iraqi federalism needs to be genuine, with reliable revenue sharing. Will my hon. Friend convey that to his Iraqi counterparts and remind them of the contribution that the Kurds and the peshmerga are making in pushing back the advances of Daesh?

Mr Ellwood: I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to the incredible work and bravery of the peshmerga. They are one of the toughest fighting forces in Iraq, and it is important that they are working with the newly trained Iraqi forces in the liberation of the city of Mosul, which has now begun. He is also right to raise concerns about the relationship between Kurdistan and the rest of Iraq. We have long maintained that it is important, and in our interests, to see a united Iraq, but recognising the federated models. It is in the constitution and, to that end, I was pleased that the bilateral forum that we had last week also included Falah Mustafa, the spokesman on foreign affairs for Kurdistan.
Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): When I visited Iraq earlier this year with the Defence Committee, it was clear that we were moving much more slowly politically than we were militarily. What support is the Minister providing to Iraqi politicians more broadly to help to keep up with the military solutions as we progress in Mosul?

Mr Ellwood: I welcome visits such as that conducted by the Defence Committee. The more engagement we have to see what is happening on the ground, the better we can understand the challenges that are faced. The hon. Lady is right to highlight one challenge that Iraq faces. As Daesh is pushed out of the country, more and more focus will be on the domestic matters that will then start to plague it. Sectarian tensions remain, the de-Ba’athification process still needs to come through, and we still need to look at counter-terrorism laws and accountability laws that must be pushed through. I can guarantee, however, that our embassy and our ambassador, Frank Baker, are doing excellent work to support the Government of Iraq.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I know the good work that Ambassador Frank Baker and his colleagues are doing in Baghdad and Erbil to make progress move along, and we should be very appreciative of their efforts.

On political developments in particular, what are the Minister’s observations on whether lessons have been learned on the issue of Sunni exclusion, which has so bedevilled political development in Iraq in recent years, and does he have greater hopes that the current Government will address that issue as the country moves forward?

Mr Ellwood: This is quite a collection, as my right hon. Friend is now the third former Minister for either the middle east or Africa whom I have addressed. It is an honour that they are here providing their wisdom to the Chamber—[Interruption.] I will watch my back.

My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to focus on the sectarian tensions I mentioned. We got it wrong, or rather Iraq got it wrong under the Malaki Government back in 2013. The absence of including Sunnis in Iraqi society led to the creation of the space for Daesh in the first place. The United Nations Development Programme and the Iraqi Government are working extremely hard to make sure that we get this right. The day after the guns fall silent in Mosul, what happens next? There must be a Sunni-led approach to ensuring that there is peace in Mosul.

Mr Speaker: No one can dispute the comprehensiveness of the Minister’s answers, for which we are grateful, but we do have time constraints.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe) mentioned the Kurdistan Regional Government, and the Minister will be aware that the KRG is hosting not just hundreds of thousands of refugees from Syria, but potentially 1 million internally displaced Iraqis. As they are not refugees, they do not receive the support or recognition that they need. If the conflict in Mosul leads to hundreds of thousands more refugees, will the Minister provide more support from our Government to the KRG?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Gentleman touches on a very serious matter that is challenging, to say the least. The UNDP recognises that once the liberation of Mosul takes place, refugees will flood out of the capital city in different directions, including into Kurdistan. When I visited, the camps were not in place. The refugees were in schools, preventing the beginning of the school curriculum in September. We pay tribute to the work of Kurdistan. Indeed, much in our DFID programmes has gone to support refugees in that part of Iraq.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): The effort to free all areas of Iraq from Daesh control is fully supported on the Labour Benches. The ongoing effort to retake Mosul will play a vital role in that strategy. How does the Minister plan to ensure that the civilian population will be protected from the fighting and that civilians fleeing Mosul will receive the humanitarian help that they need?

Mr Ellwood: As I mentioned, the UNDP is co-ordinating all aspects of the UN. Working with the Iraqis, it is taking the lead on the stabilisation and reconstruction of the city. Prime Minister Abadi has made it clear that no peshmerga—no Kurdish forces—or Shi’ite mobilisation forces should enter the city. This is a predominantly Sunni city and it should be liberated initially by Sunni Iraqi forces. A civilian-trained police force will provide important security after that.

Syria

11. Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Syrian opposition.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): I spoke to Dr Riad Hijab, the general co-ordinator of the Syrian High Negotiations Committee, on 6 October and again on 13 October. We discussed the importance of the Syrian opposition’s continued commitment to the political process.

Sir Desmond Swayne: What importance does my right hon. Friend attach to countries in the region in bringing together the Syrian opposition?

Boris Johnson: I am most grateful to my right hon. Friend. As the House may know, on 7 September we had a meeting in London, together with the High Negotiations Committee led by Dr Riad Hijab, of the interested parties in the region. He set out what I think was a very compelling case for a post-Assad Syria with a broad-based Government and pluralist democracy. I think they have a plan for 30% female representation in their politics, which is perhaps better even than the Labour party. He answers one of the key questions: is there a future for Syria after Assad? There most certainly is—and a great one, too.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I am saving the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) up. I call Alison McGovern.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): It is not just the Syrian opposition but Syrian civil society and non-governmental organisations in this country who are
calling for our Government to lead on a comprehensive strategy to protect civilians, including a no-bombing zone. Will the Foreign Secretary confirm that our Government will now take a lead in considering this strategy?

Boris Johnson: I pay tribute to the forcefulness with which the hon. Lady has advocated this course. I must say that I wish that, three years ago, the then Labour Opposition had been as resolute in wishing to see that kind of engagement to protect the people of Syria. A critical decision was taken then, as the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) well remembers, which has made things much more difficult for us today. I want to see the will of this House clearly expressed in support of what the hon. Lady has said.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): The fact of the matter is that with America increasingly absorbed by a sometimes surreal presidential election, France and Germany facing elections of their own next year, Secretary Kerry soon to leave office and a change of leadership at the UN, a degree of paralysis has entered into the negotiation process on Syria—

Mr Speaker: Order. I rather thought that the right hon. Gentleman had finished. That was a fairly long sentence, will he please blurt it out?

Boris Johnson: I thought my right hon. Friend’s question was excellent. It goes to the heart of what is happening at the moment. As I said earlier, the space vacated by western powers has been occupied, I am afraid, by the Russians. We need to do whatever we can now to put pressure on the Russians—through sanctions, through the threat of the International Criminal Court—[Interruption.] Indeed, and through measures such as the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) suggests from a sedentary position. These measures are already in place in this country.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Foreign Secretary aware that although many people in Syria and in the aid agencies can understand the sort of bombastic bluster that he is so good at, the fact is that serious diplomacy will require a calm, rational approach if we are to secure peace in Syria?

Boris Johnson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman but, alas, I think that what is really needed at this stage is a tough approach, because the primary cause of the suffering of the people of Aleppo is the Syrian regime. That is overwhelmingly responsible for the deaths of 400,000 people in the conflict so far. That regime is backed by its Russian puppeteers, and it would be a fatal mistake if we were now to lose sight of that priority, and to give up on applying the pressure that is needed on Russia and its Syrian clients.

Italian Passports

13. Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): What discussions he has had with the Italian embassy in London on ensuring the timely provision of Italian passports to UK residents.

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): The issuing of Italian passports is a matter for the Italian authorities. There have therefore been no discussions so far with the Italian embassy about the issuing of Italian passports to Italians.

Richard Fuller: Bedford is proudly home to a large multi-generational Italian community that has relied on our local honorary consul for the provision of their Italian passports. There has been a sustained and large increase in demand for Italian passports, and I am told that capacity at the Italian embassy is limited. Will the Minister please raise this issue with the ambassador?

Sir Alan Duncan: There are in the UK, and especially in Bedford, a number of British nationals who are eligible for an Italian passport and have recently applied for one. That is, as I said, a matter for the Italian Government, but I can assure my hon. Friend that I will raise the matter with them as appropriate.

21. [906659] Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Due to the uncertainty created about the future of EU citizens living in the UK and the Government’s obsession with reducing immigration, does the Secretary of State agree that it is now easier and more secure for EU nationals to become a citizen of Asgardia—a recently founded nation state in space—than it is to remain a valued citizen of a country where they have lived and to which they have contributed for many years?

Sir Alan Duncan: I think that the issue of the fate of such people is rather more serious than the tone adopted by the hon. Lady in the House today.

Mr Speaker: We are short of time, but I want to hear Kelly Tolhurst.

Yemen

14. Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con): What support his Department is providing towards the finding of a political solution to the conflict in Yemen.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): The Foreign Secretary hosted a meeting on Yemen with key international partners and the UN envoy, Ismail Ahmed, on Sunday, when it was agreed that the UN would present a road map for a political settlement to both parties as soon as possible. The UK and the US have called for an immediate ceasefire on all sides.

Mr Speaker: Indeed. That was what I was volunteering.

Mr Ellwood: With your permission, Sir.

Kelly Tolhurst: The Yemeni population continues to suffer from preventable military incidents carried out by both sides in the conflict, most recently at the funeral where 140 were killed and 500 injured. Given the Minister’s timely and important visit to Riyadh last week, what
assessment was he able to make of the standard of the regional initiative seeking to address the high number of civilian casualties?

Mr Ellwood: This was a tragic event, and our sympathy and concern go out to all those affected by it. It was also a huge mistake, and it is important for Saudi Arabia to be able to investigate it properly. My purpose in travelling to Saudi Arabia was to ensure that message from the Prime Minister, and to say that we needed an accurate understanding and investigation of what had taken place. Saudi Arabia has already produced an initial document that shows that its hand is going up in recognition of a huge breach of standard operating procedures. According to that document, at least one individual will be charged, and there are now plans to provide humanitarian support for those who have been injured.

Catherine McKinnell: The scenes of destruction and starving children in Yemen put the international community to shame. Does the Minister agree that in no circumstances should British weapons be used to target civilians, and if so, what are the Government doing to prevent that from happening?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady has raised the important question of who is doing the bombing, what is actually happening, and how those responsible can be made accountable. There is no doubt that this is a very difficult war. One of my reasons for inviting the Saudi Arabian Foreign Minister, Adel al-Jubeir, to the House yesterday to meet parliamentarians was to ensure that everyone here could put those very questions, and so that he could hear from our Parliament about concerns that have been expressed not just yesterday, or indeed today, but over a number of months. A coalition has been put together under United Nations resolution 2216 to support President Hadi. We must ensure that that war is legitimate, but let us not forget that the devastation has been caused by Houthis as well.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): The whole House will welcome the announcement of a 72-hour ceasefire in Yemen, which will begin on Wednesday night. We share the hope of the United Nations that that can become the basis of a lasting peace, and that the children of Yemen can now receive the humanitarian relief that they so desperately need. However, as the Secretary of State observed in respect of Aleppo last week, and indeed today, the end of a conflict does not end the need to investigate possible violations of international humanitarian law. When can we expect full, independent, UN-led investigations of the thousands of airstrikes on civilian targets in Yemen?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. Lady received her answer when she posed the very same question to the Foreign Minister yesterday. It is standard for any country engaged in warfare, when a mistake is made, to conduct its own investigation and produce a report. I have said in the Chamber that if I feel that that report—or any report—is undervalued and is somehow to be dismissed, I will certainly join the hon. Lady and others in saying that there should be an independent UN-led investigation. After I visited Saudi Arabia, however, we saw a report that made very clear exactly what had happened. I have encouraged people, as I did at yesterday’s meeting, to say that there are reports outstanding. There are not thousands, as the hon. Lady suggested—that is to mislead the House—but there are a number with which we are concerned that need to be clarified.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sure that the word “inadvertent”, or the word “inadvertently”, was in there somewhere. One cannot accuse other Members of misleading the House.

We now come to topical questions. I remind the House that topical questions are supposed to be brief, and so are the answers.

Topical Questions

T1. [906627] Natalie McGregor (Glasgow East) (Ind): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): My priority for the rest of 2016 is to ensure that there is a robust and measured response to the crisis in Syria, while pressing home our campaign against Daesh and working alongside our allies to protect the rules-based international system against the ambitions of Russia, and to achieve an ambitious and outward-looking global Britain.

Natalie McGregor: Military action in Mosul could result in the displacement of 1 million civilians, and the International Committee of the Red Cross has claimed that it can provide for only 300,000 people, with the United Nations providing for 60,000 more. What provisions, measures and plans have been agreed to guarantee civilian safety, the security of food and water resources, and the prevention of a catastrophic humanitarian crisis?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): As I implied in my reply to an earlier question, it is important that we get what happens when the guns fall silent correct. We cannot afford to have a refugee crisis of the scale that has been suggested, which is why the international community has come together on several occasions, including at Washington DC—the Foreign Secretary and I attended—to ensure that we have the necessary measures in place to support those who are fleeing, that any chemical weapons attacks that might take place can be dealt with, and that there will be a form of processing so that we can capture people who have committed war crimes and put them on trial.

T2. [906628] Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend outline the state of UK-Turkish relations, particularly following claims made during the Brexit debates earlier in the year?

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): The Turkish Government appreciated our early condemnation of the coup attempt of 15 July. We work very closely on migration, counter-terrorism and other matters, and I will be paying my second visit to Ankara later today.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): The attempt by members of the former Libya Dawn Government to retake control of Tripoli is deeply worrying to all of us who want security and stability to return to Libya. Who
does the Foreign Secretary believe is currently in charge in Libya, what is his strategy for achieving that security and stability, and who does he think is responsible for the mess Libya now finds itself in?

Mr Ellwood: I could speak for an hour on that last question and say how misleading—inadvertently misleading—it is. It does not help us to suggest that somehow what happened in 2011 is applicable to what is happening today. There was a Libyan Government, there was a Prime Minister and there were elections, and many of the international community were asked to leave in 2011-12. After 40 years of misrule under Gaddafi, society is now trying to develop, and that is the challenge we face today.

T4. [906630] Rishi Sunak (Richmond (Yorks)) (Con): My constituent Nicholas Simpson and five other ex-servicemen are being held in a jail in Chennai. May I urge my right hon. Friend and the Government to do everything in their power to work with the Indian authorities and resolve this situation for all the families concerned?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Alok Sharma): My heart goes out to the families. I raised this case with Minister Akbar when I was in India in July, and I raised it again on 5 October with the Indian high commissioner to the UK. I know that my hon. Friend is working incredibly hard to highlight this issue and I look forward to meeting him and hon. Members representing the other families tomorrow.

T3. [906629] Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) asked earlier about Londoner and British citizen Andy Tsege, a political dissident who was kidnapped in June 2014. In June this year, the Foreign Secretary’s predecessor announced in a press release that he had “secured assurances from the Ethiopian Government that Mr Tsege will be granted access to a lawyer”. Those assurances have not been honoured. Will the Foreign Secretary now formally request the release of Mr Tsege?

Boris Johnson: I have set out our position on Mr Tsege in an open letter on gov.uk. I cannot, I am afraid, comment further, because our handling of this case is the subject of ongoing legal proceedings.

T6. [906632] John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): Evidence from Syria of hospitals and aid convoys being deliberately targeted and bombed have horrified and outraged people around the world. The Foreign Secretary has already said those responsible should be held to account in the International Criminal Court and that the Russians and the Assad regime are primarily responsible for what is going on. What measures would he therefore support to charge, arrest and prosecute either Putin or Assad, or both?

Boris Johnson: The most important thing at this stage is that the UK is leading the way in accumulating evidence against those responsible for these crimes. It will be essential, ultimately, that we have good secure testimonials against those responsible and I have no doubt that in due course they will be useful. The mills of justice grind slowly, but they grind small.

T5. [906631] Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Last week on a cross-party visit to the west bank I was deeply concerned by the human rights abuses being perpetrated by the Government of Israel. Can the Foreign Secretary tell me when the follow-up legal report into the Israeli treatment of Palestinian child detainees will be published and outline the reasons for the delay?

Mr Ellwood: The hon. and learned Lady raises an important aspect of what is a very complicated challenge in the middle east that has been rumbling on for far too long. I raised this issue with the Deputy Foreign Minister during my last visit. We have tried to get further access and further conditions put in place to make sure those child detainees are provided with the support they deserve.

T8. [906634] Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): As chairman of the all-party group on Argentina, may I congratulate the Minister on the steps that he has taken to bolster UK-Argentine relations? Does he agree that there are important consequences for the continued improvement in relations between our two countries?

Sir Alan Duncan: Yes, I am happy to confirm that. Indeed, the Government are building a much more constructive relationship with the Government of Argentina. During my visit to Buenos Aires, I agreed an historic joint statement that established closer co-operation across our bilateral relationship, which includes some important benefits for the Falkland Islands and for Argentina.

T7. [906633] John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The Foreign Secretary hosted diplomats from nine countries as well as the United Nations special envoy in London on Saturday to discuss Syria, but apparently no agreement could be reached on the delivery of aid and no future date was set for a further meeting. Will he tell us what went wrong?

Boris Johnson: On the contrary, the meeting on Sunday was extremely successful in the sense that there was a unanimous agreement from all the parties concerned—not only France, Germany and Italy, but Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, the United States and ourselves—that we should proceed to put pressure on the Assad regime and its puppets in the form of the Russians on the basis that I have already outlined to the House: economically, diplomatically, through the United Nations and through the use of the International Criminal Court.

T10. [906636] Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): What support is the United Kingdom giving to international efforts to address the dangerous political situation in the Democratic Republic of the Congo?

Mr Ellwood: I have had the opportunity to visit the DRC, a country that my hon. Friend knows extremely well. President Kabila is refusing to step back; he wants to continue after his two terms. We have made the case...
forcefully that he must honour the constitution and allow the democratic process to take place. It is a large country, with 80 million people, and if it goes back into a dark chapter, there will be consequences for the surrounding countries. We are in a very delicate place in the development of democracy in that country.

Boris Johnson: I have a constant exchange of views with my friends and colleagues from the Department for Exiting the European Union and the Department for International Trade to draw up a plan to secure our continued access to the single market, which will protect the economy in Northern Ireland?

Mr Speaker: I have not heard the right hon. Gentleman sing, but I feel sure that it would be melodic and that it is only a matter of time.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): In the light of the EU referendum, we have heard that there is lots of international interest in signing trade deals with the United Kingdom. What practical steps is my right hon. Friend's Department taking to contribute to the effort to ensure that we get those deals signed, sealed and delivered?

Boris Johnson: One of the most extraordinary things that I discovered on becoming Foreign Secretary was the full extent of the network that the UK has around the world. We have more coverage overseas than the French with only 70% of their budget. My experience of UK diplomats and trade officials is that they are superlatively well informed about the needs of UK business and industry, and that they will assist us in doing first-class free trade deals in every capital.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Further to Questions 1 and 12, is not the British Government uniquely placed to bring Pakistan and India together in some form of talks, particularly given the fact that tensions are probably higher than they have ever been and that we are dealing with two nuclear powers?

Boris Johnson: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for her question. I can tell her that my view remains absolutely crystal clear—adamantine—that we will be better off extricating ourselves from the toils of the EU legal system. As the Prime Minister rightly said, we are going to leave the penumbra of European legislation and that is the right thing to do for this country. We will go forward with a fantastic free trade deal in goods and services that will be good for this country and good for the EU.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): Given the deteriorating security situation in and around Lashkar Gah, what lessons has the Foreign Secretary learned from the British deployment to Helmand?

Mr Ellwood: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman’s work—he knows the country extremely well indeed. It is important that we provide support to Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah. Unfortunately, the Taliban have pushed back from the Pakistani border and until we get some sense of governance back into the capital city of Lashkar Gah, I am afraid that the Taliban will continue to push towards Kandahar.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): Following the Government-commissioned study into the resettlement of the British Indian Ocean Territory, when do Ministers envisage making a decision on the resettlement of the Chagos islanders?

Sir Alan Duncan: I assure my hon. Friend that we are still considering the issue and will report back to the House in due course.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): I cannot stop raising this matter until the Martin family from my constituency get the support that they deserve. Their daughter, Claire Martin, died in Italy four and half years ago following multiple stab wounds to her throat. Her last words were “a man”. Her death was recorded as a suicide. Will the new ministerial team reply to my letter and agree to a meeting with the Martins?

Sir Alan Duncan: We have a dedicated consular team that often has to deal with issues of this sort. I will undertake to write to the hon. Lady. If she wants to come to see me and consular officials, I would be happy to arrange such a meeting.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): I thank the Minister for his answer on Kashmir, where I was born. He says that it is up to India and Pakistan to come forward on the matter, but to get a long-term, lasting solution, the people of Kashmir must be given the right to self-determination in accordance with the 1948 UN Security Council resolution. The Prime Minister has said that she supports the rights of the United Nations—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I indulged the hon. Gentleman and the least he could do was to be brief.
Alok Sharma: As I noted earlier, we of course want a lasting peace in Kashmir. As for the resolution, we should be taking into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We have overrun, but I am keen to accommodate colleagues. The last person whom I will be able to accommodate is Mr Rob Marris.

Rob Marris (Wolverhampton South West) (Lab): What recent discussions have Her Majesty’s Government in the United Kingdom had with Her Majesty's Government in Canada on the outcome of the European Union referendum?

Sir Alan Duncan: There are regular discussions with the Government of Canada, which I look forward to visiting in due course. As for trade deals, they are a matter for the Department for International Trade.
Liberation of Mosul

12.38 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Lab/Co-op) (Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the liberation of Mosul and progress in counter-Daesh operations in Iraq and Syria.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): In the early hours of Monday morning, Prime Minister al-Abadi announced the start of the Iraqi-led operation to liberate Mosul. Iraqi forces are converging on the city from the east and south in the biggest offensive of the counter-Daesh campaign, designed to break Daesh’s grip on the largest city still within its grasp.

Iraqi forces have been preparing for the operation since the capture of Qayyarah in August. The aim is to drive out Daesh, but in a way that protects civilians. Thousands of Iraqi security personnel have passed through the coalition’s building partner capacity training programme, to which the UK makes a major contribution. Alongside other coalition aircraft, the RAF has been providing intelligence-gathering and intensive air support to Iraqi ground forces. More than half of the RAF’s recent strikes have been in and around Mosul. On the ground, British military instructors are, with coalition colleagues, helping to train, mentor and equip many of the forces engaged in the Mosul operation.

We recognise, as do the Iraqis, that this will be the greatest challenge that their security forces have yet encountered, and it will have significant humanitarian implications. The United Nations, in co-ordination with the Government of Iraq, is putting in place critical supplies of life-saving assistance, such as shelters, medical services and food, and the United Kingdom recently committed £40 million for the Mosul aid plan, bringing the total amount pledged by the UK to help Daesh’s victims in Iraq to almost £170 million since 2014. This will not be a quick operation, and we can expect Daesh to fight hard to keep Mosul. When I visited Baghdad and Erbil three weeks ago, senior Iraqi and coalition commanders outlined their plans for Mosul. Their confidence is high, and it is clear that Daesh is now failing. This year, it has suffered a series of crushing defeats: Ramadi was liberated in February, as was Hit in April and Falluja—the first city to be seized by Daesh—in June. Overall, the Daesh extremists now hold only 10% of Iraqi territory.

Ridding Iraq of Daesh was never going to be quick or easy, but as we enter the third year of the campaign, real progress is being made. Defeating Daesh in the long term will help make the streets of Britain and Europe safer. I am sure the whole House will want to join me in paying tribute to the vital role of our armed forces in defeating this evil.

John Woodcock: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer and, on behalf of the whole House, I pay tribute to the UK forces and all those involved in this incredibly dangerous operation. All of us who live free from oppression and go to bed each night in relative safety owe a debt of gratitude for what is being done to counter Daesh, as that evil force would destroy all our ways of life, no matter where we are.

I thank the Secretary of State for the detail he gave on current UK involvement, but can he say more about how he thinks it may evolve as the operation goes forward and as the question becomes one of defeat rather than of liberating territory, but of maintaining security in Mosul and elsewhere? What is the UK doing to press our coalition partners to ensure that the protection of civilians is given the utmost priority? Everyone will know that he does not go into the details of operations and targeting, but it is well known that the UK has a more rigid procedure than applies in other areas and so what can he say about that?

What the Secretary of State said about Daesh being beaten back is so important, as we know. Daesh set itself up in Mosul as a caliphate that was to precede, in direct time, the “end of days”, which would secure Daesh’s particular perversion of Islamic law across the whole world. What can coalition partners do to get the message out to those who might otherwise be attracted into this madness that it is failing on its own terms and should not in any way be supported?

Finally, in Foreign Office questions, which helpfully preceded this urgent question, mention was made of reconstructing Mosul and Iraq. How will we show that we have learnt the lessons of previous failures over the past decade in Iraq, where we left a vacuum which the extremists were able to fill, both geographically and in the minds of Iraqi people?

Sir Michael Fallon: I am particularly grateful to the hon. Gentleman for reminding us of the overall purpose of this campaign, which is not simply to help defend the new democracy of Iraq, but to eradicate a threat to us all and to our way of life. He asked me a number of questions. The UK will continue to assist this campaign; the RAF will be closely involved in air support of ground operations. We have already been targeting key terrorist positions, and command and control buildings in and around Mosul. The specialist mentors who have been helping to train Iraqi forces will continue to provide that support, although away from the combat zones. The rules of engagement that I set at the beginning of this campaign two years ago are not changed by the operation in Mosul, although it will of course be more difficult to conduct this operation in a closely packed urban environment.

So far as the future is concerned, the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that when Daesh is eventually driven out of Iraq, as I hope it will be, we will have to continue all our efforts to combat its ideology and look more deeply at what attracted people to join up in the first place. We will need to work with moderate Islam right across the world to ensure that that perversion does not increase. Above all, as he said at the end, we need to learn the lesson of this campaign, which is that we must ensure that the Sunni population of Iraq has sufficient security in future and that we do not have to be asked back to do this all over again.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): One lesson of the campaign in Iraq is clearly that if air power is to make a valid contribution, it must be in support of identifiable ground forces. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it has been much easier to identify ground forces that we can support from the air in Iraq than it has been, or will be, in Syria? Does he also agree that
when Daesh is pushed out and ultimately defeated, there will be no shortage of other groups that adhere to the same poisonous totalitarian theology as Daesh, but that are not as vulnerable as Daesh because they do not propose to seize and hold territory?

Sir Michael Fallon: On the first point, my right hon. Friend is right. In Iraq, we have an operation that is being led by the Iraqi Government. These are Iraqi troops who are fighting for the freedom of their own country and to protect their own people. In Syria, we have some moderate ground forces—the Syrian democratic forces—who are ready and willing to take on Daesh. Although we see the liberation of Manbij and other towns and cities in the north of Syria, I accept that the situation in Syria is very much more complicated. If his final question was that we should despair and simply do nothing, I do not accept that. We must confront evil where we see it in this world, and, given the professionalism and power of our armed forces, I believe that where we are able to help those nascent democracies that ask for our help then we should do so.

Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): The horror that Daesh has inflicted on the people of Mosul since it captured the city in June 2014 is unimaginable: women killed for not wearing full Islamic veils and gay men thrown from buildings. We fully support the operation to liberate the city, because Daesh, in its evil ideology, must be defeated wherever it emerges. I say that not only to protect the people of Iraq and Syria who have suffered such a great deal, but to protect our citizens here in the UK from the global threat posed by Daesh.

I appreciate the answer that the Secretary of State gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock). Although I fully accept that he cannot divulge the operational details on the Floor of the House, I ask him to set out in greater detail the full extent of the RAF’s involvement in the future, and how he intends to keep this House informed?

A number of forces are assisting with this important offensive, including militia groups and paramilitary figures, but there is concern about what would happen if some of these groups were to go into the city. What assurances has the Secretary of State had from the Iraqi authorities that, as the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), indicated earlier, it is only the Iraqi army and Iraqi police who will enter Mosul? We expect this offensive to last weeks and possibly months, but, once it has been completed, there will be a need to secure and defend Mosul to ensure that Daesh is driven out for good and that the city does not descend into sectarian fighting. Will the Secretary of State tell the House what preparations are being made to protect the citizens and to rebuild the city, including the city’s infrastructure?

On the humanitarian situation, the United Nations has warned:

“In a worst-case scenario, up to 1 million people could be displaced”
as a result of this offensive. Will the Secretary of State set out in greater detail what humanitarian assistance the UK will be providing, not just in the immediate term, but in the longer term, to support any displaced people?

We stand in solidarity against Daesh and its wicked ideology, and with the brave armed service personnel who will be assisting vitally in this important campaign.

Sir Michael Fallon: Let me welcome the hon. Lady to her position. I think she is the fifth shadow Defence Secretary in the past two and a bit years, but she is welcome for all that. I particularly welcome the full support that she gave to this operation and the role that British forces are playing in it. I hope the House will continue to support the operation through thick and thin. It will be a complicated operation militarily, involving the liberation of a very large city, and I am grateful for her support.

The hon. Lady asked me five specific questions. First, the role of the RAF will continue to be to strike deliberate targets, particular positions and command and control centres in and around Mosul, as well as offering close air support to the ground assault as it begins. Secondly, we will keep the House regularly informed. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary is due to give the next of a series of regular updates. I gave one earlier in the summer and he is due to do that shortly, but I certainly undertake to keep the House fully informed. Thirdly, the hon. Lady asked me about some quite well-founded concerns that different groups—the Popular Mobilisation Forces, the peshmerga and so on—will go into areas of Mosul where they might not be particularly welcome. That has been very carefully evaluated by both the Iraqi and Kurdish leadership. Red lines have been drawn and everybody involved is very keen that those lines should not be crossed.

Fourthly, on the security of the city, Mosul is a very complex city, not entirely Sunni, but it is extremely important that the day after the city is liberated, the population there feel that they have sufficient reassurance—not just the reconnection of essential services, but sufficient reassurance—in the security of the city to be able to return. Finally, the hon. Lady asked me about the humanitarian assistance. Yes, as I think I said earlier, we will be providing tented accommodation and food supplies as part of the United Nations programme. The Minister of State, Department for International Development, my hon. Friend the Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart), has people ready in Iraq, and we are ready to go in and provide that help as soon as the fighting finishes.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Defence Secretary rightly commented on the contribution being made by British forces to this successful operation. He is correct to do so, but does he agree that this is an opportunity to reinforce our messages about the military covenant and the support that our armed forces in their turn need from us? In that context, will he particularly bend his mind to the new accommodation model that the Ministry of Defence is currently considering?

Sir Michael Fallon: I am happy to look at that again. As my hon. Friend knows, we have made great strides with the covenant in recent years, enshrining it into the law of the land and following up its implementation with local authorities and others. We are looking at new
ways of providing or assisting with military accommodation. We are consulting on that and I will certainly bear my hon. Friend’s comments in mind.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): We all earnestly hope that the liberation of Mosul will be swift and decisive and that Daesh will finally be driven out of Iraq for good. As we have heard, lessons must be learned from previous such military operations in Iraq, particularly the recapture of Falluja earlier this year, when non-Government militia were allowed to enter the city before the Iraqi security forces. Can we make sure that this does not happen in Mosul where, because of its huge strategic importance and the multi-ethnic composition of its inhabitants, the risks are much greater and the mistakes cannot be repeated? What discussions have the Secretary of State and his Department had with the Iraqi security forces, the Iraqi Government and the peshmerga to make sure that the 1.5 million civilians, including the hundreds of thousands of children, are protected both during the liberation of the city and in its rebuilding thereafter?

Sir Michael Fallon: I thank the hon. Gentleman and I hope he fully supports the operation. Four Scots were killed on a beach in Tunisia by extremists a little over a year ago, and we all have an interest in making sure that Daesh is finally driven out of Iraq and the threat to our own people is reduced. He asked the question at the front of everybody’s mind—that there should be no reprisals from one group or another as these cities are liberated. We have to learn the lessons each time and, city by city, improve the way in which security and reassurance can immediately be provided. That is something that I reviewed with the Iraqi and the Kurdish authorities on my recent visit, and everybody is aware of that danger.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement, which we welcome. It is early days in this conflict and we hope all goes well. I hope we can spare a thought for the journalists who were following preparations for the assault and some of whom are now close to the frontline. He raises an important point about Iranian influence not simply in Iraq, but in a number of these countries. Iran has the opportunity now, following the signing of the nuclear agreement, to show that it can be a force for good in these countries, and it is up to Iran to live up to its undertakings. The Iranians have given clear undertakings that they will not intervene malevolently in these cities as they are liberated in Iraq and we expect them to stick to that.

Sir Michael Fallon: My right hon. Friend is right to praise the contribution of the British media, which have been following preparations for the assault and some of which are now close to the frontline. He raises an important point about Iranian influence not simply in Iraq, but in a number of these countries. Iran has the opportunity now, following the signing of the nuclear agreement, to show that it can be a force for good in these countries, and it is up to Iran to live up to its undertakings. The Iranians have given clear undertakings that they will not intervene malevolently in these cities as they are liberated in Iraq and we expect them to stick to that.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): We all wish the forces embarking on this operation well. Is the Defence Secretary aware of any arrangements that are being put in place as the liberation proceeds to collect evidence, including forensic evidence, of crimes that have been committed? As well as defeating Daesh in this city, it is important that those responsible for the most awful crimes are held to account in a court of law.

Sir Michael Fallon: The whole House would endorse that. The answer is yes, it is for the Iraqi Government to lead on that. This is an Iraqi operation, but my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary made it clear in New York recently that we will be looking for sufficient evidence to indict in some form or other the leaders of this barbarism in recent years and see that they are held properly to account. With other countries in the coalition, we are also looking to see how we will treat our own foreign fighters who may be detained and potentially returned to this country, to make sure that they, too, are held to account for any crimes that they may have committed.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): Further to the question from the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn), does the Defence Secretary agree that there is a need for specialist UK input into investigating those crimes, which are utterly horrendous?

Sir Michael Fallon: I will certainly look at that. We have specialist expertise in this country, as my hon. Friend probably knows better than anybody, and the Iraqi Government are aware that they can call on that expertise, but I will remind them of it.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State say a little more about how he hopes the liberation of Mosul will impact on the campaign against Daesh in Syria, to which Parliament quite rightly extended consent for RAF involvement last year?

Sir Michael Fallon: Daesh regards Mosul as one of the two centres of the caliphate, alongside Raqqa, so we expect its defeat there to be a body blow more generally. It will sever the lines of communication between the two cities, and as a result, Raqqa will become more isolated as the border is increasingly sealed. The Daesh fighters who remain in Raqqa will have no other place to go. There will certainly be a military impact, but I hope that the liberation of Mosul will go further by helping finally to banish the mystique of Daesh, because it is not a successful organisation; it is a failing organisation that can and will be defeated.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I add my thanks to the serving UK personnel for all the work they are doing in the region. It is clear to me that there is already a serious humanitarian crisis in Daesh-controlled Mosul. What forward planning has been undertaken to ensure that those who have already been affected get humanitarian aid and those who sadly and inevitably will be affected receive the assistance they need?

Sir Michael Fallon: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. It is important for the House to understand that there is already a humanitarian crisis inside Mosul. People there have been living under this appalling regime for over
two years, suffering all the barbarities associated with it. That is the situation at present, even before the liberation has begun. To answer her question directly, the Department for International Development is part of the United Nations development programme. The Iraqi Government will ensure that civilians, where they can get out in advance of the final assault, are transported easily to safer areas, and then our agencies are ready to go in alongside the United Nations to ensure that there is sufficient food, medical supplies and tented accommodation for the others.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Further to the question from the hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), aid agencies estimate that more than 700,000 people will be displaced by the conflict—more than the population of Glasgow. Save the Children is concerned that we do not yet have tents in which to put those people up or safe routes to ensure that they can get out of the city unimpeded by Daesh and other forces. Can the Secretary of State provide some reassurance on what the Government can do to provide safety on those routes, and tents and services when those people arrive?

Sir Michael Fallon: Those are very valid concerns that arise from what is now becoming a warzone in and around Mosul. As I have said, the Iraqi Government are fully aware of the need to cope with any increase in the displaced population, to arrange transport for those who can get out of the city to safer areas and to be ready with additional tented accommodation—winter is coming—to house the others. There has been a great deal of planning all summer for this operation and its consequences—what we call the day after Mosul is liberated.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend know whether Iraqi and peshmerga field medical units are as far forward as possible, so that they can tend for the wounded on all sides when they come in, and quickly?

Sir Michael Fallon: On my recent visit to Erbil, I saw for myself some of the medical evacuation training that British troops are offering to the peshmerga, showing them how to get casualties away from the frontline as rapidly as possible. That has been a big part of the training that we have been able to offer. They are now relatively seasoned troops; they have been doing this kind of operation for many months in other towns and villages, both in the north of Iraq and along the Euphrates valley, although not on this scale. They certainly understand the importance of getting casualties off the battlefield as quickly as possible.

Mr Pat Mcfadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): The taking and holding of territory has been central to Daesh’s philosophy, in contrast to some earlier manifestations of that kind of ideology, so what is the next step in reducing the territory that will be held by Daesh after this operation, as well as combating the ideology, which in recent years has been used to justify not only what Daesh has done, but the killing of innocent civilians, from Mali to Tunisia, France and many other countries?

Sir Michael Fallon: The next step in Iraq is to push Daesh beyond the border, which will mean some mopping-up operations in the north of Syria and to the north and west of Mosul, and clearing Daesh out of some remaining smaller towns along the Euphrates river valley. Members of the coalition, in our regular meetings—we will be meeting in Paris next week—are already looking at what more can be done to counter Daesh globally and whether we can set up structures now that will enable us to respond much more quickly and come to each other’s aid should Daesh resurrect itself in different parts of Africa, or indeed in the far east.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Given the Abadi regime’s inability to deliver reform, would not we be wise to plan on the basis that Iraq is unlikely to survive as a unitary state and is more likely to break into its constituent confessional and ethnic parts?

Sir Michael Fallon: With respect to my right hon. Friend, I do not think that it is for us in this House to question now the integrity of Iraq or start designing a different shape for either it or Syria. We tried that around 100 years ago—indeed, it was a Conservative Back Bencher, Sykes, who first drew the line that runs between Syria and Iraq and presented it to Prime Minister Asquith. My right hon. Friend knows from his own ministerial experience how frustrating the pace of reform has been in Iraq—for example, to get the security and policing right, to delegate sufficient powers to the governors and to ensure that the army is properly accountable. Slowly, those reforms are being put in place. I think that we must continue to do what we are doing, which is accepting that these things are slow, but there is a democratic Government in Iraq who genuinely at the moment represent Shia, Sunni and Kurds in Iraq, and we have to work with them.

Derek Twigg (Halton) (Lab): First, on the Secretary of State’s point about driving ISIS out of Iraq, what assurances can he give the House that we will not see a repeat of the situation that followed the surge in 2006-07, which would allow ISIS to re-emerge from the deserts and move into Syria? What steps has he taken to stop that, working with the coalition partners? Secondly, when the hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Rory Stewart) and I were in Iraq a couple of years ago, we were appalled by the dearth of intelligence. Is he satisfied that there have been significant improvements in intelligence on the ground?

Sir Michael Fallon: On the first point, nobody in the coalition—it includes some 60 countries, all involved in one way or another—wants to be back in Iraq doing this all over again in five or 10 years’ time, so we need to ensure that the political settlement that is left when Daesh is pushed out of the country endures and is as embedded as it can be and that both Sunnis and Shi’a can rely on sufficient security to get back to their cities, towns and villages and live their lives. We will therefore continue to encourage the process of political reform, which has been far too slow—in many respects, it has been behind the military progress that has been made. We will continue to encourage that.
David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): My right hon. Friend will recall that after the fall of Baghdad in the Iraq war, the allies were roundly criticised for not having a plan for reconstruction, thereby creating a vacuum, which, as we know, is extremely dangerous. Is he confident that an adequate plan for reconstruction will be put in place immediately after the fall of Mosul?

Sir Michael Fallon: As I said before, this is an Iraqi-led plan—an Iraqi-led campaign—to liberate Mosul, but from everything I have seen from visiting Baghdad recently, the Government are planning to get security into Mosul and to ensure that the essentials of life are restored there as quickly as possible, working through the local administration and the governor of Nineveh province, to make sure that people feel safe and can return to their homes. We will encourage that process politically, and we will also back it materially, with assistance from the Department for International Development.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): The Secretary of State will be well aware of some of the horrific war crimes that have been committed against the Yazidi women in Mosul. Will he speak a little about what specialist services he and his colleagues will be able to provide for those women when they come out of that desperate situation?

Sir Michael Fallon: The Department for International Development has some specialist programmes already in preparation to deal with some of those victims of the barbarity we have seen. It is also important that those who are responsible for that barbarism, if it was done on a genocidal basis specifically against the Yazidis, are properly held to account, and that is something we are working on with other members of the coalition.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): It is good to hear about the positive progress that is being made in the counter-Daesh strategy, and particularly about the important role that is being taken forward by the peshmerga Kurds. What will the role of UK forces play in training those forces, and what other needs may have been identified for further assistance?

Sir Michael Fallon: It is perhaps worth saying that, when my hon. Friend refers to progress, we are at the very start of this campaign to encircle and then liberate Mosul. I must remind the House again that this may not be easy; there may well be setbacks along the way. We have trained a large number of peshmerga forces, as well as Iraqi troops, over the past two years. We can be proud of the role that the British Army has played, particularly in training them to deal with improvised explosive devices, which have been seeded on a much larger scale than in any previous campaign we have come across—far greater than in Afghanistan or in the original Iraq conflicts—and in helping them to deal with evacuation to face snipers. It has been a consistent training effort over the past two years, and I hope that, as a result, the peshmerga are better able to deal with what will be a very difficult assault.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Lab/Co-op): This conflict is taking place in a globalised world with social media. Will the Secretary of State take this opportunity to send out the very clear message that, although we have not seen the crimes and atrocities carried out inside Mosul by Daesh, terrible things will be portrayed from this conflict, which could take weeks or months, and many people will die, but that is a necessary part of saving the world and particularly of protecting Muslims around the world, who are dying as a result of the horrors carried out by this caliphate cult?

Sir Michael Fallon: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who has experience of chairing the Foreign Affairs Committee in previous Parliaments. He is right: horrors are being perpetrated every day in Mosul, and that was the case long before the liberation and the assault started. We should not forget that some of these horrors have been perpetrated on our own citizens—on the hostages taken back in 2014—and others have been subject to atrocities ever since. It is important that the world does not forget just how evil Daesh has been in the extremes to which they have gone in punishing or killing those who happen not to accept the perversion they believe in.

Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): Militias have been relied on to help defeat the death cult Daesh, but concerns have been raised about the involvement of Shi’a militias in liberating Mosul, based on the atrocities witnessed by Sunni residents during Falluja’s liberation from Daesh. What assurances has my right hon. Friend received that the very sectarian tensions that facilitated the rise of Daesh in the first place will not be stoked by Shi’a militias in Mosul?

Sir Michael Fallon: It is a very legitimate concern, rooted not just in some of the earlier operations but in earlier conflicts. Those were assurances that I pressed for, and examined very closely, on my recent visit. There are red lines drawn on which units are allowed to go where as the encirclement operation begins. All I can say to my hon. Friend is that everybody in Baghdad and in Erbil—the Sunni and Shi’a members of the Iraqi Government—is very much aware of the need to do this operation, in what is essentially a Sunni city, but not entirely a Sunni city, in a way that gives the majority Sunni population of Mosul the confidence to return to their city in the knowledge that they will be able to live safely there thereafter.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): As the offensive continues, it is likely that many Daesh fighters will try to blend in with the local civilian population. Can any specialist training be undertaken for the peshmerga and other forces to ensure that, if that does happen, any terrorist atrocities that may emerge in the longer term from within civilian life are limited?

Sir Michael Fallon: That is an important point. We do not yet know whether Daesh will stand and fight, which they have done in some cities, or whether they will try to melt away. All we know at the moment is that Mosul is a very well-defended city; preparations for its defence have been going on as long as preparations for the assault, so all the signs are that Daesh will defend it for some time. However, the hon. Gentleman makes a valid point about training. Specialist units in the Iraqi forces are trained in this counter-terrorism work, and
we have every interest in making sure that the Daesh leadership, in particular, as well as the rank and file of the terrorists, are detained wherever possible.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): A successful ground offensive will require a huge improvement in the morale and fighting spirit of the Iraqi forces. What part have the UK and her allies played in making that improvement to the morale of Iraqi forces, and is my right hon. Friend confident that he can continue that work, so that Daesh has no respite and no chance to re-establish itself?

Sir Michael Fallon: I was impressed by the confidence of Iraqi commanders on my most recent visit, compared with their approach to all this, say, a year ago. They have been encouraged by the relative ease with which cities and towns along the Euphrates river valley were liberated. They were—certainly a few weeks ago—very much looking forward to the Mosul campaign and regard it as something that is difficult but doable. They have that confidence, and the Iraqi troops that I have seen being trained by our own forces are a very different army from the army that first fled in front of the Daesh advance in the spring and summer of 2014.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): First, I would like to wish our armed forces a safe and successful campaign. We have heard that up to 1 million civilians may flee Mosul, many of them children who will have been deprived of education, who will have suffered the psychological impact of warfare and who, in the case of young teenagers, may be screened by the Iraqi forces as they come out. What ability do the UK Government have—on the ground, directly—to monitor the safety, education and health of young children?

Sir Michael Fallon: Counselling of children, and indeed child protection, will be central to the work of the International Development Department and the United Nations programme after the liberation of Mosul, but the right hon. Gentleman is right to caution us. This is a military assault on a very large city; this is likely to be a war zone for some weeks and months. The Iraqi forces have done their best to warn the population of what lies ahead, but this is going to be difficult, and they are going to make every effort to protect the civilian population from the assault itself.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): As chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on the Kurdistan region in Iraq, I thank the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) for tabling this urgent question and for visiting the region and engaging with the group. I also personally thank my former colleagues in the Royal Air Force for their service in this operation. Military support to the peshmerga is ongoing, but will the Secretary of State update the House on what rehabilitation and medical support there might be, particularly bearing in mind the wonderful facility at Headley Court, for any injured peshmerga fighters?

Sir Michael Fallon: My hon. Friend is right to pay tribute to the Royal Air Force. We have touched on the role of the British Army, but over the past two years, since the House gave its authority for strikes in Iraq, we have seen the most intense campaign being managed by the Royal Air Force from Akrotiri and other bases in the Gulf, at a tempo we have not seen since the first Gulf war. I know the House would want to pay tribute not only to the pilots who fly the planes but to the huge back-up operation that sits behind them. On his particular point about medical support, perhaps he will allow me to write to him.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): The Secretary of State is absolutely right to stress that this is an Iraqi-led campaign but our armed forces are there because it will make a material difference to our own safety here. On that basis, what can he do, and what can we all do, to ensure that people in this country realise that we are engaged in this campaign not because it is a war against Islam but because it is a war that is being undertaken to support a democratically elected Muslim Government against those who would pervert that religion for their own barbaric ends?

Sir Michael Fallon: On the first point, we must all continue to remind our constituents of why we got involved back in the summer of 2014: the horrors that were inflicted on our hostages; the barbarity of the treatment of women and of gay people in Daesh areas; and the indiscriminate slaughter that Daesh has inflicted, as we have seen in western Europe, on people whether they shared the Islamic faith or not. We do have to remind people of why we are there. Then we have to do much more to support moderate Islam in some of the very good work that is being done in this country and elsewhere, through programmes run here and in other countries, including Saudi Arabia, on how we de-radicalise those who might be tempted to join this kind of extremist terror in future.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the start of this operation, but it is worth bearing in mind that it could turn into a fire fight in a large urban area with an enemy that is absolutely fanatical and has absolutely no respect for human rights law. How satisfied is the Secretary of State that the forces taking part have the ability to conduct this operation according to the current rules of engagement, and that we will have measures in place to allow civilians to flee while making sure that the cowards in Daesh, who are likely to run away from the onslaught, will be identified and captured?

Sir Michael Fallon: My hon. Friend is right to warn the House that this will be a fire fight—a series of fire fights. I have been at pains to indicate that it is not going to be easy; it is going to be difficult in a very crowded urban area. Inevitably, there will be damage, and no doubt civilian casualties as well. As regards rules of engagement, the Iraqi Government have assured the coalition that their troops are bound by the rules of international humanitarian law—the Geneva conventions—just as western forces are. Indeed, that has been part of the training that we have been able to offer.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): Bruno Geddo, the Iraq representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, is reported on the BBC as saying three days ago that if the situation in the city “is arranged in a proper way—everything will be controlled by the Iraqi army—people will not be allowed to flee Mosul”.


What will “people will not be allowed to flee Mosul” mean in practice?

Sir Michael Fallon: It is already quite difficult for the civilian population to get out of Mosul. They are being restricted, in the first place, by Daesh, which does not want them to leave Mosul, but the city is now, of course, being increasingly encircled by the forces that are there to liberate it. I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that the Iraqi Government are ready to help civilians who can get out of Mosul by getting them easily to much safer areas well away from the frontline. As he suggests, the United Nations will be working with its agencies to make sure that help is brought forward as quickly as possible to those civilians who do escape.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Television news coverage yesterday seemed to suggest, first, that the balance of forces between the Iraqi army and the peshmerga and Daesh was about 10:1; and secondly, that the Iraqi army had access to very heavy armour whereas the peshmerga did not. Are both those things correct, or was I not paying enough attention?

Sir Michael Fallon: I think my hon. Friend pays quite a lot of attention to most things, and I would not want to accuse him of inattention. I am not sure about the exact percentage that he quotes, but having visited Erbil recently and been out with the peshmerga and seen the training they receive, it is clear that they have sufficient equipment to participate in this operation, and have a well-defined role within it.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I associate myself with the comments in support of our armed forces, but also send our thoughts and prayers to the people of Mosul who will be living through the liberation. As the Secretary of State knows, what became clear after Ramadi was the industrial use of IEDs to undermine people’s lives as they tried to move back into their homes. There were huge human casualties associated with that within the Iraqi forces. We have very specialist expertise in this area. Given the scale of Mosul, with 1.7 million people, we can only imagine what they are doing. What additional support are we giving to the Iraqis in terms of training to deal with the counter-IED operation?

Sir Michael Fallon: This conflict has a much larger dimension than previous ones. We have seen industrial-scale use of IEDs in cities such as Ramadi and elsewhere, where IEDs have been built into the walls of houses, concealed in rubble, and put under desks in schools and colleges. We have had to help the Iraqi army learn how to deal with that. A huge part of the training effort that we have been putting in at the four building partner capacity centres across Iraq has been specifically dedicated to counter-IED training that helps troops to recognise different types of IED, to recognise the traps that may be laid within IED devices, and to clear the IED once they have identified it.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): The previous al-Maliki Government pushed a sectarian agenda against the Sunnis that led to the rise of Daesh. Bearing in mind that the composition of Mosul is predominantly Sunni, what steps have been taken to ensure that the Iraqi army is reflective of that, given that Turkey has indicated that it will be sending troops into Mosul to ensure that Sunnis’ rights are protected?

Sir Michael Fallon: We all want to make sure that Sunnis’ rights are protected. It is incumbent on the Iraqi Government, who have Sunni, Shi’a and Kurdish representation, to ensure that all parts of Iraq are fully protected. The aim of the Government in the reforms that they are driving through is to devolve more power to the governor of Nineveh province, in which Mosul sits, to ensure that he and the local administration can provide such reassurance. It is critical to the campaign that Sunnis in Iraq understand that the Iraqi forces are for them as much as for the Shi’as.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I am sure the Defence Secretary agrees that one of the positive developments is that the peshmerga and the Iraqi forces are working together against Daesh for the first time. Can he suggest ways in which that constructive co-operation might be continued in other operations?

Sir Michael Fallon: That co-operation is essential not only for the liberation of Mosul, a city that sits very near to the Kurdish region, but for the future of Iraq. I am encouraged by the recent negotiations over the distribution of the oil revenue and some of the other accommodations that have been reached between Prime Minister Barzani and Prime Minister al-Abadi down in Baghdad. I hope that that will bode well for the integrity of Iraq as well as for the future of the Kurdish and Iraqi populations.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I also support our Government’s role in this operation. There are already reports that Daesh is threatening to use civilians as human shields and to execute anyone trying to flee. Can the Secretary of State confirm that that is accurate, and is there anything that can be done to counter that particular form of barbarism?

Sir Michael Fallon: I have seen reports along the lines of Daesh being prepared to put women and children in military buildings in order to prevent those buildings from becoming a target. We are dealing with a ruthless enemy that has not hesitated, over two years, to kill anybody, including woman, child and fellow Muslims. There is very little that we can do to control that, other than to show our absolute determination, whatever the cost and difficulty of this campaign, to deal with Daesh and to get it out of Iraq altogether.
Points of Order

1.31 pm

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The Public Accounts Committee has summoned witnesses from the Department for Communities and Local Government to come before it tomorrow to explain reports that the troubled families programme has not been achieving its aims. Since 5 October, my Committee has been asking the Department to release six evaluation reports on the scheme. After much delay, they were finally published on the Department’s website at 6 o’clock yesterday evening. The reports amount to 800 pages of evidence. I am very concerned that, with the tardy release of that important information, the Government are trying to obfuscate proper parliamentary scrutiny of an important Government flagship programme and the money spent on it.

I seek your support and guidance, Mr Speaker, on how we can ensure that Ministers are reminded of the importance of providing proper information to this House so that we can carry out our task for citizens and taxpayers in scrutinising the Government’s business.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, both for her point of order and for her courtesy in providing me with advance notice of it. There is a clear expectation that Government Departments should co-operate fully with Select Committee inquiries, not least inquiries of the Committee of Public Accounts, and that they should furnish information in a timely fashion. That does not appear to have happened in this case. If for any reason there is a problem, the Department should communicate it promptly to the Committee so that it can, if it so wishes, adjust its schedule. I am sure that the hon. Lady’s concerns have been heard on the Treasury Bench and that they will be conveyed to the relevant Ministers. Meanwhile, she has made her point clearly, and she has done so on the record.

Quite how the hon. Lady and her Committee wish now to proceed in the light of the untimely provision of a vast tranche of information is, of course, for them to consider. Upon the whole, one would expect that a Committee would undertake its work without also considering Chamber devices for scrutiny of Ministers. The two, however, are not automatically and necessarily mutually exclusive, so if at some point the hon. Lady, a member of her Committee or any other Member wishes to probe a Minister in the Chamber on the substance of the issue or the reason for what appears to be an excessive delay, it is open to them to seek that route. I make no promise as to whether it would be successful, but it is open to Members.

The key point is that Committees hold the Government to account, and it is up to the Government to co-operate with the Committee, not only in accordance with the letter, if you will, but in accordance with the spirit.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance on information provided to MPs in written answers regarding military matters. It is customary—and necessary, of course—not to provide information about some security matters to Members. No doubt that is why, in answer to a written question about whether the UK Government will display online the flight paths of Russian planes over Syria, I was told that that information could not be made available for security reasons. Could you advise me, Mr Speaker, whether I could challenge that ruling, given that such information is readily available in relation to commercial planes, that the Russians know that they are being monitored and, indeed, that they have to be, to avoid conflict in Syrian airspace?

Mr Speaker: I had no advance notice of this and I know that the right hon. Gentleman is inclined to invest me with sagacity and powers that perhaps I do not possess. I am disinclined to respond substantively on the matter at this time, but my advice to the right hon. Gentleman, which I hope he will welcome, is that at this stage his best course is to write to the Secretary of State and seek either to elicit a written reply, which he can then study and evaluate, or alternatively to request a meeting to discuss the matter. If that route does not avail him, he can come back to Chamber, and I have a strong hunch that he will do so.

If there are no further points of order and the appetite has been satisfied, at least for now, we come to the ten-minute rule Bill.
The Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon.

So far this year, the price cap has saved £300 million, as so important. Agency work cost £3.3 billion last year. Paid to agencies for their staff in NHS organisations is a year for agency staff in those two categories alone.

Trust used agency workers in the posts of band 2 the NHS employing more agency staff. That, in turn, leads to do the same job for more money. That, in turn, leads to bodies require. That is compounded by the fact that fewer people with the specific skills that some NHS particular problem in rural areas, where there are simply struggle to fill certain gaps in staff owing to a lack of individuals or of specific skills. That is a no better way of managing the enormous agency bill than by ensuring that the data are used wisely.

The NHS has a budget of £116.4 billion for 2015-16. It is distributed among NHS providers, including 11 NHS trusts in England, one of which is the Wye Valley NHS Trust, which administers my constituency of North Herefordshire. In 2014-15, the Wye Valley NHS Trust budget was £183.637 million. Most of the trust’s expenditure is on staffing, which last year cost it £115.4 million—63%—of its total expenditure. That includes all staff—permanent, bank and agency.

Agency staff cost more than permanent staff directly employed by the NHS, because private companies dictate what our public NHS pays for them. The Government are working to limit that cost to the NHS by introducing a cap on fees paid to agency workers. I support and congratulate the Government on their work to limit the increasing privatisation of the NHS, because I am against the principle that private agencies can control NHS spending and I do not want the NHS open to abuse, which can be the case under our current system.

I propose the creation of a database of all workers in the NHS—agency and direct employees—and that it takes note of when they are working or claiming sick pay. Those data already exist in NHS bodies, and I would like them to be pooled to benefit the whole of the NHS.

There is too much reliance on locums and agency workers. We all know that our NHS staff are some of the most hard-working individuals, as they strive to keep our communities healthy and safe, but there is a struggle to fill certain gaps in staff owing to a lack of either of individuals or of specific skills. That is a particular problem in rural areas, where there are simply fewer people with the specific skills that some NHS bodies require. That is compounded by the fact that those who are qualified can become agency workers and do the same job for more money. That, in turn, leads to the NHS employing more agency staff.

Between February and April, the Wye Valley NHS Trust used agency workers in the posts of band 2 healthcare assistants and band 5-plus registered nurses for an average of 1,966 shifts a month, at an average cost of £746,000 a month. That equates to £8.9 million a year for agency staff in those two categories alone.

That is why the Government’s work to cap the amount paid to agencies for their staff in NHS organisations is so important. Agency work cost £3.3 billion last year. So far this year, the price cap has saved £300 million, as the Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon.

Friend the hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), said in response to a question on 12 September, although I have heard that the figure is now much closer to £650 million. In order to support the excellent work that the Government are doing, we should accordingly require agency staff—and, in particular, information about their sick days—to be centrally registered on the NHS. Because information about agency workers is not detailed centrally on the NHS, staff may be employed directly with an NHS trust and also registered with an agency. These two employers do not share information about their workers, even though agency workers are based in NHS organisations. People may say that there are not enough staff in the NHS, but it is clear that there are if we count them properly. A register like the one I am proposing will also demonstrate the areas in which we need to focus our training resources, to make sure that we train the right people.

The vast majority of workers who are employed by both organisations are hard-working, honest people, but there are always some who seek to abuse the system. In 2015, a nurse who worked for an NHS hospital trust was struck off after making £10,000 by working agency shifts while on sick leave, and that is not an isolated case. Such cases cost the NHS not only through fraudulent sick pay but more generally as a cost to the public purse, and we also lose the individuals involved.

The NHS is aware of the risk of payroll abuse and sick leave fraud, and it has sent leaflets to members to make them aware of it. However, without a central system of data sharing between these bodies, organisations have to rely on hearsay to report abuse of the system. This is a good starting point, but it does not eliminate the risk of fraudulent activities, and we need the money to be saved for patients.

The lack of communication between the bodies needs to be rectified. We need to combat those who take advantage of the system by making information about employees more accessible to employers, to make sure that employees are paid fairly and the NHS does not suffer unnecessarily. The Bill would support the Government’s hard work to reduce unnecessary costs to the NHS by making it harder for those who take advantage of the system to do so. The Bill would create a centrally kept register of all the agency staff used across the NHS. The register would indicate when those staff were off sick and claiming sick pay. If those data were pooled, abuse could be spotted. The small cost that would be involved in pooling agency data is far outweighed by the risk of abuse and lack of control. All the data already exist, after all; it is simply a case of sharing them.

Information about the sick pay of NHS employees is already stored and reported on. For Wye Valley NHS Trust last year, the figure was just 4.33%. By the same yardstick, agency workers are paid by a public body, so their sick pay data should be stored and shared. There is no better way of managing the enormous agency bill than by ensuring that the data are used wisely.

People speak against the privatisation of the NHS, but that is exactly what will happen if the NHS loses control of its staff requirements. Agencies provide the staff our patients need for their safety. That must be controlled; otherwise, we will never be able to achieve
the worthy target of getting the right pay for the right people, doing the right jobs. Our NHS staff deserve no less.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Bill Wiggin present the Bill.

Bill Wiggin accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 24 March 2017, and to be printed (Bill 76).

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): I inform the House that Mr Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of John Nicolson, whom I will call to move the amendment formally at the end of the debate.

1.44 pm

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley): I beg to move,

That this House approves the draft Agreement (Cm 9332), between the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and the British Broadcasting Corporation, which was laid before this House on 15 September 2016.

I start with an apology. Although I am delighted to be here for the debate, I will have to leave at some point this afternoon—I hope that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and the House will forgive me—because we have, as Members will know, a magnificent celebration of our Olympic and Paralympic athletes. It was an enormous pleasure to be in Manchester with them yesterday, and I look forward to seeing them again today.

I am delighted to welcome the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson) to his place. It is a great pleasure to see him sitting opposite me, and I am sure that we will enjoy many happy debates across the Dispatch Box.

The BBC is the best broadcaster in the world, and it is widely recognised as such throughout the world. Despite what some people would have the world believe, the Government know that the BBC is one of our greatest institutions and must be nurtured and cherished. The fact that we received more than 190,000 submissions to our consultation shows how deeply people care about the BBC. It is, therefore, quite right that the changes we are making to the BBC will strengthen it, secure its funding, protect it, decouple the charter from the electoral cycle and ensure that the BBC not only survives but thrives.

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): The Secretary of State has talked about providing appropriate funding for the BBC to make sure that it is funded well. At the same time, the Government have inappropriately imposed on the BBC the costs of free licences for the over-75s and of overseas monitoring for the security services and the Foreign Office. What does she have to say to that?

Karen Bradley: I have also enjoyed sparring with the hon. Gentleman across the Dispatch Box. I will come on to the details of the funding later, but I believe that this funding settlement is a strong one that puts the BBC on a sustainable footing with an inflationary increase in the licence fee.
Karen Bradley: The BBC has agreed to this through negotiations and discussions, and I am confident that the funding settlement puts the BBC on a sustainable long-term footing.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab) rose—

Karen Bradley: I will take one more intervention, and then I will make some progress.

Christian Matheson: I must correct my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). This funding mechanism is not to pay for free TV licences; it is, surely, to pay for a Conservative manifesto commitment.

Karen Bradley: The funding settlement is to pay for the very best BBC, which we all want to see. I am absolutely confident that this funding settlement will provide that.

Kelvin Hopkins: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Karen Bradley: No, I will make some progress, if the hon. Gentleman will forgive me. I will come back to funding shortly, but I want to put on record the fact that the draft charter contains a few small, technical omissions and errors. We will publish shortly a revised charter that includes all those points, on which I know some hon. and right hon. Members have picked up.

The BBC royal charter and agreement will support a BBC that makes and broadcasts world-class content; that provides impartial, high-quality news; that is independent, transparent, and accountable; and that works with, rather than against, the rest of the United Kingdom creative sector. The BBC director-general, Lord Hall, hailed the draft charter as “the right outcome for the BBC and its role as a creative power for Britain”.

The new royal charter will make the BBC stronger in a number of ways. It will increase the BBC’s independence, improve its regulation, make it more transparent and accountable to licence fee payers, and make it better reflect the whole United Kingdom. First of all, the BBC will become more independent.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): The former arts Minister, the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), does not think so, as he told us last time we debated the matter. Many of us in this House think that the idea of suddenly forcing the BBC to pay for free television licences is a complete disgrace.

Karen Bradley: I understand that point, but I think this structure will give the BBC more independence. The fact that the majority of directors will be appointed by the BBC makes it clear that the Government want the BBC to be independent, to be strong and to succeed.

Karen Bradley: My hon. Friend exactly sums up the position.

The longer—11-year—royal charter will separate charter renewal from the electoral cycle, which has been widely welcomed. I reiterate that the mid-term review after six years will be a health check, not another charter review in all but name. It is surely eminently sensible to check how effectively new arrangements are working before 11 years have gone by. Moreover, article 57 of the charter states:

“The review must not consider…the mission of the BBC;…the Public Purposes of the BBC; or…the licence fee funding model of the BBC for the period of this Charter.”

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that there will be a further huge change in viewing habits from traditional television to online and on-demand viewing over the 11-year charter renewal period? Will she consider decriminalising non-payment of the TV licence over the charter renewal period, which would be widely supported and welcomed?

Karen Bradley: I know my hon. Friend has campaigned strongly on this issue, and I understand the point he makes. I will go through some further points about the new charter. The BBC will be regulated more effectively under it. The charter and agreement set out Ofcom’s new role as the BBC’s independent regulator. Ofcom
will monitor and review how well the BBC meets its mission and public purposes, regulate editorial standards, hold the BBC to account on market impacts and public value, and consider relevant complaints from viewers, listeners and other stakeholders where complainants are not satisfied with resolution by the BBC.

**Maria Eagle:** Given the high number of extra roles and duties that Ofcom is taking on, will the Secretary of State undertake to the House today to ensure it is properly remunerated and given enough resource to do the extra job it will now have to do?

**Karen Bradley:** Ofcom has been asked about that point, and it has set out that it has the capabilities and the competence to do this work. The charter is the result of extensive negotiations between the BBC, Ofcom and others, and I am confident that Ofcom has the resources to be able to fulfil its obligations.

It is fundamentally important that the BBC should be impartial. Colleagues have been keen to impress that point on me in the run-up to and following the EU referendum. Although it is not for the Government to arbitrate on such matters, I will make sure that Ofcom never forgets what a vital duty it has in this regard. These are big new responsibilities for Ofcom, and it is rightly going to consult with the industry on its new operating framework for the BBC next year.

It will also be Ofcom’s job to set regulatory requirements for the BBC to be distinctive. Schedule 2 to the agreement makes it clear that the BBC’s output and services as a whole need to be distinctive, so concerns that this is a way for the Government to interfere with specific programmes are totally unfounded. The provisions in the charter that place new duties on the BBC to consider its impact on the market are not about reducing the BBC’s role per se.

**Ian C. Lucas** (Wrexham) (Lab): I would be very interested to know the right hon. Lady’s personal perspective on what “distinctive” means. Does it mean distinct from other channels or from international broadcasters? Will she clarify what it means in this context?

**Karen Bradley:** I think “distinctive” means both those things. It means that the BBC is a unique and distinctive broadcaster that offers a range of outputs across television and radio, appeals to a wide variety of the population and offers programming that simply would not be delivered in a commercial context.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): One of the distinctive areas and advantages of the BBC is its ability to take forward policy initiatives such as commitments to minority language broadcasting. Does the Secretary of State understand the concern felt among those in the excellent operation at BBC Alba that the framework agreement as currently drafted is not entirely to their advantage? It needs to be looked again, particularly with regard to the fact that the funding source should continue to come from the BBC UK pot as part of a commitment to minority languages across the whole of the UK.

**Karen Bradley:** BBC Alba is a wholly owned subsidiary of the BBC. The charter and the framework set out very clearly the requirements on BBC Alba. I would be very happy to meet representatives of BBC Alba if they feel that something has not been considered, although, from our previous conversations, I think such points have been addressed.

**Henry Smith** ( Crawley) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that one of the most distinctive forms of BBC output and the way in which it probably comes closest to meeting its public service requirements is BBC local radio? It provides the very focused and, I would argue, often unique output that is very valuable to many communities up and down the United Kingdom.

**Karen Bradley:** I agree with my hon. Friend that BBC local radio is very important for all our local areas. I will give BBC Radio Stoke a plug, because I know it would be disappointed if I did not do so. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (Ruth Smeeth) seems to agree with that point. I am sure we all feel the same about our local radio. The point of the charter and the framework is to provide such a regional focus and to ensure it is maintained.

**Kelvin Hopkins** rose—

**Karen Bradley:** I have taken several interventions, and I am afraid I want to make some progress.

We are making the BBC more transparent and accountable, as is only right for an institution that receives so much public money and means so much to the public. The salaries of individuals who earn £150,000 and above will be made public. There will also be a full, fair and open competition for the post of chair of the new BBC Board. The National Audit Office will become the BBC’s financial auditor, and it will be able to conduct value-for-money studies of the BBC’s commercial subsidiaries. The NAO is held in very high regard, and it has extensive experience of scrutinising commercial and specialised organisations such as Network Rail and the security services.

Finally, the Government have listened carefully to those who said that the BBC must better reflect and represent each of the home nations. They are right. The charter provides for a strengthened public purpose, emphasising the fact that the BBC has a central role in the creative economy across the UK’s nations and regions. Appointment to the unitary board of members for the nations will need the agreement of the devolved Minister or, for the England member, the Secretary of State. The charter obliges the BBC to appear before Committees and to lay its annual reports and accounts in the devolved legislatures.

**Ian C. Lucas** rose—

**Karen Bradley:** The Secretary of State commends BBC Radio Stoke, and I know that local radio is hugely important. Is it not unfortunate, therefore, that we do not have BBC local radio in Wales? One station alone represents the whole of Wales—BBC Radio Wales, along with Radio Cymru. Is it not time that we had local radio services in Wales in the way we have them in England?
Karen Bradley: Clearly that is a matter for the BBC. I sometimes pick up BBC Radio Wales in my constituency in Staffordshire—it seems to have a wide and long reach and is clearly reaching areas outside its normal remit.

The BBC must fully reflect the diverse nature of the UK. For the first time, diversity is enshrined in the charter’s public purposes and requirements on minority language provision are strengthened. The charter will be considered by the Privy Council before the Government seek Royal Assent.

We had an excellent debate in the other place last week and I am pleased to have another opportunity to debate the world’s finest broadcaster in this Chamber. Our changes will secure the future of the BBC, strengthen it, give it an unprecedented degree of independence and make it more transparent, accountable and representative. This Government believe in the BBC.

2.1 pm

Mr Tom Watson (West Bromwich East) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I particularly draw Members’ attention to the fact that I have only recently stood down as vice-chair of the all-party group on the BBC.

May I say how much we are looking forward to working with the new Secretary of State and her team? She was generous and engaged in constructive dialogue when she was a Home Office Minister, and I hope that we can continue that relationship in our new posts. I also wish to thank my predecessors in this role, my hon. Friends the Members for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins), who has shown that he has not lost his tenacity or his energy in this policy area, and for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), who offered such robust scrutiny of the White Paper when it was discussed earlier in the year.

The Labour party welcomes the fact that the charter provides the BBC with the funding and security it needs as it prepares to enter its second century of broadcasting. The BBC embodies those enduring British values of hard work, creativity, innovation and co-operation. It helps to ensure that Britain’s voice is heard around the world, and it has informed and entertained countless millions of listeners, viewers and web users. It did so once again over the summer with its truly exceptional coverage of the Olympics in Rio, and I know that the whole House will agree that we should acknowledge that on the day we celebrate the achievements of our athletes by throwing a fantastic party in Trafalgar Square later.

While we welcome the charter, we have some misgivings, as the Secretary of State has seen, about the responsibilities that the BBC has been obliged to accept. In particular, we are extremely concerned about the Government’s decision to force the BBC to meet the cost of providing free TV licences to the over-75s. That was done without meaningful public consultation and little parliamentary debate, and it was part of a deal that was made behind closed doors.

Kelvin Hopkins: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his appointment as shadow Secretary of State; I am sure he will enjoy the job.

The imposition of the cost of licences for over-75s was carried out at the same time as the charter was being negotiated. Does that not imply that a degree of duress was involved in making the BBC accept that decision?

Mr Watson: It is certainly not the most ideal of circumstances to face when negotiating for survival. We do not think that there was a meaningful public consultation and we had hoped that those days were behind us. We feel strongly that that situation cannot be allowed to happen again. This was the second time that the Government had approached their deliberations with the BBC by placing a gun to its head. In 2010, the coalition Government forced the BBC to take on the cost of paying for the World Service. The Government approached the negotiations in 2010 and 2015 with the subtlety of a ram raider approaching a jewellery shop. Their approach was described as a “smash and grab raid”.

We expect the Secretary of State to reassure us that the next licence fee settlement will be agreed in a transparent manner and according to a clear timetable. It must be subject to parliamentary scrutiny and put out to public consultation, so that whoever is in power cannot railroad a settlement through again. Please will the Secretary of State give a guarantee to the House that such a system will be put in place? We will work with her to achieve that.

I am sure that some people believe that asking the BBC to pay £700 million a year for free licences was clever politics, but I think it was political irresponsibility, verging on negligence. The BBC is not an arm of the Government. It should not be asked to meet the cost of Government policies and it should not be asked to implement changes to the Government’s social security policy.

Karen Bradley: It is worth putting on record that the BBC licence fee has been frozen for the last six years. The Government have agreed to increase the licence fee in line with inflation, which will result in additional income for the BBC of £18 billion in the period up to 2021. That is more than enough compensation for the money the hon. Gentleman is talking about. The issue of licences for over-75s was dealt with outside the charter arrangements. This is a fair settlement that gives the BBC good funding and the licence fee payer good value for money.

Mr Watson: It is certainly a settlement. The BBC has accepted it as a settlement, and that is why we will not oppose the motion, but it is not unreasonable for us to press the Secretary of State on why an instrument of social security policy is being passed to the BBC. We are considering carefully whether we can challenge the measure in the Digital Economy Public Bill Committee, because the extra cost imposed on the BBC is the equivalent of a 20% budget cut. I know the deal has been struck and different income streams have been negotiated within it, but the manner in which it has been done is distinctly unfair. The Government are passing responsibility for social security cuts that they should take on to a British institution.

Ian C. Lucas: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr Watson: Yes. I should point out that I have a bad ear infection and can hardly hear a thing today, so hon. Members will have to shout if they want my attention.

Ian C. Lucas: When my hon. Friend considers trying to amend the Digital Economy Bill, will he bear in mind that £630 million of public money was taken from the BBC to fund broadband in the previous Parliament? The Government have real form with raids on the BBC.
Mr Watson: We will of course take on board my hon. Friend’s wise advice.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Watson: Hmm, yes.

Mr Vaizey: I am sorry to shout so dramatically, but I took on board what the hon. Gentleman said—I listen to every word he says—about his ear infection and I wanted to grab his attention. May I point out that the money from the BBC television licence fee that was used for broadband was actually the surplus left over from Labour’s highly successful digital switchover programme? That programme was so successful that it underspent its budget, and we used the surplus to pursue our own extremely successful broadband programme.

Mr Watson: I am being slightly diverted from the motion. I have only been in this role for 10 days, so I may not have my facts entirely right, but I think that the £630 million that my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) described has also been underspent to the tune of £60 million. It would be very useful if the Government could give that money back to the BBC so that it could be put into diverse broadcasting such as children’s broadcasting, in which the right hon. Gentleman and I both have an interest.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman accept that in an age when all other public bodies are being asked to make efficiency savings, it is reasonable for the BBC to be asked to share some of the burden, especially given the fact that the BBC overspends on a lot of programme making? For example, it took twice the number of people to the Olympics than other broadcasters took? Salaries are still going up, the top echelons have not been reduced and huge pension settlements are still being given to those who leave the BBC.

Mr Watson: I hope that I have not given the hon. Gentleman the impression that I do not think viewers need value for money—they certainly do. The transparency measures agreed by both sides of the House have helped to ensure that the value-for-money case is made internally within the BBC.

Kelvin Hopkins: Hon. Members are eliding public spending, which is paid for by taxation, and licence fee spending, which might be seen as a relatively regressive form of taxation, but is not public funding in the same sense.

Mr Watson: My hon. Friend makes a very good point.

We will always make the case for a strong, independent and well-funded BBC. That was what we did in government and it is what we intend to do in opposition. I hope that we can move on from the days when a small group of campaigners routinely questioned whether the BBC should exist at all. For a handful of people, the licence fee that has funded the BBC for nearly a century is an aberration. They believe that the only reliable, durable and perpetual guarantor of independence is profit. Perhaps they believe that 40p a day is an outrageous price to pay for the BBC’s startling array of television and radio news coverage, current affairs programmes, natural history, drama, comedy and children’s programmes. Perhaps they would rather see the BBC smaller and a little duller. I do not believe that and the British public do not believe it either. That was why there were 192,000 responses to the Government’s consultation on the future of the BBC, and why the overwhelming majority were favourable and supportive.

I pay tribute to the campaigners whose tireless work helped to deliver a BBC charter that is likely to secure its future: the Great BBC campaign, founded by Lord Waheed-Alli and Charlie Parsons; the Save our BBC campaign; the 38 Degrees petition to protect our BBC, which now has over 390,000 signatures; and all the creative industry trade unions, including the Broadcasting, Entertainment, Cinematograph and Theatre Union, Equity, the Musicians’ Union, the National Union of Journalists and the Writers’ Guild of Great Britain. All came together in a coalition to defend the BBC. They raised awareness, generated support and helped to deliver those 192,000 responses to the Government’s consultation. On both sides of the House, we are indebted to them all.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I agree completely that there was some very effective campaigning, but will the hon. Gentleman accept that there was also a lot of unnecessary scaremongering? For example, an accusation was sent to Government Members’ mailboxes about the wholesale destruction of the BBC by the Tories. That was never the intent and never the case, and some people need to apologise.

Mr Watson: I am afraid that I am not quite sure of the specific allegation of scaremongering, but the hon. Gentleman has made his point and it is on the record.

We welcome the royal charter and the security it gives the BBC. In particular, I welcome the Government’s U-turn, as the consultation on the future of the BBC that they published in July 2015 was very different in tone and intention to the proposals before us now. We welcome the fact that the BBC’s funding settlement will now be decided every 11 years; it is particularly helpful to remove it from the five-year election cycle.

We welcome the settlement, but we know that an institution the size of the BBC can never be perfect. We believe the BBC has a responsibility to look and sound like Britain, both on screen and off. It should do far more to identify, employ and promote talent from every background and every walk of life. That means recruiting far more people from our black, Asian and minority ethnic communities. It means more women of every age in senior roles off screen and in leading roles on screen. It also means employing people from every social background.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): Thinking about the pupils of Ashfield, I would like to make a practical suggestion. The BBC should go into schools in constituencies such as mine and tell pupils that work experience is open to them. Their parents pay the licence fee, so they should have the opportunity to work there.

Mr Watson: That is a fantastic idea. Perhaps we can build up a case to allow the BBC to extend its reach into schools in areas like my hon. Friend’s constituency.
Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman also agree that in the light of Ofcom’s new diversity obligations, the make-up of the UK population should be better reflected in terms of personnel and senior management?

Mr Watson: That is a very insightful point about something that we can work together to monitor.

I was talking about employing people from every social background. The BBC has a duty to reflect the nation it serves. That means informing and entertaining licence fee payers, as is set out in the charter, but the BBC must also do more to encourage and support British talent regardless of ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, disability or social background. It is well placed to do that because, almost uniquely, it has a strong and visible presence across the country. There are BBC studios in Birmingham, Bristol and Belfast. The BBC has offices in Leeds, Nottingham, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Cardiff and many more places too numerous to list. It has a duty to reach out to the communities on its doorstep.

The BBC has significantly expanded its apprenticeship programme. I commend director-general Tony Hall for that but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ashfield (Gloria De Piero) points out, there is far more we can do. According to research carried out in 2015 by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, over nine in 10 jobs in the creative economy are done by people in more advantaged socio-economic groups, compared with 66% of jobs in the wider economy. That has to change.

Karen Bradley indicated assent.

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock) indicated assent.

Mr Watson: Ministers are nodding in support of that, so I hope that they can reassure me that the new and explicit commitment to diversity will also cover social class. I grew up in an era when working class actors such as Michael Caine, Glenda Jackson and Julie Walters were giants of popular culture.

Helen Goodman: You’re not that old.

Mr Watson: I am; I am feeling it, anyway.

I have nothing against Benedict Cumberbatch and Eddie Redmayne—I admire their talent hugely and they are great ambassadors for our country—but we need more people like Julie Walters, Christopher Eccleston and Paul McGann. And it should not fall to Lenny Henry and Idris Elba to be the face of the BBC’s diversity programme.

Matt Hancock: This is an appropriate point in the debate to underline the cross-party support for this direction of travel. The BBC knows that it has a lot more work to do. As the hon. Gentleman says, diversity is explicit in the charter, and that means diversity in all its forms: yes, protected characteristics such as ethnic background, gender and sexual orientation, but also social background—wherever people come from and from whatever walk of life.

Mr Watson: I welcome the Minister’s reassurance about that. We will work constructively with the Government to make sure there is a framework so that the BBC can actually achieve its targets. As Andrew Rajan wrote only last week:

“there have been decades of lip-service being paid in praise of diversity by the various gatekeepers of finance and programming, but nothing has changed at all”.

The BBC has published its own national target, which commits it to hiring 15% of staff from black, Asian and minority ethnic groups by 2020, but I am afraid it has a poor record on this. In its evidence to the Puttnam inquiry, the Campaign for Broadcasting Equality said that despite the BBC’s many diversity initiatives and programmes, it has consistently failed to meet its own targets. This cannot continue, so I welcome the Minister’s commitment to making sure that that does not happen.

The people we see on screen, the people who create what we see on our screens and the people who lead television must look more like the people we see on our streets. That means seeking out talent, on screen and off, from the black and minority ethnic communities. It means ensuring that roles do not mysteriously disappear for older women and it means creating roles that do not automatically exclude candidates with disabilities or mental health issues. The charter’s new commitment to diversity is welcome and Ofcom’s role as the BBC’s new regulator will be vital. It will help to bring about a truly diverse BBC that reflects the nation it serves. The point the hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) makes is well taken. Will the Minister tell us how Ofcom will monitor and enforce its new diversity duty? Will it publish data about the number of BBC employees from minority groups? Will it monitor on-screen talent and publish information about where that is drawn from? Any detail that the Minister could provide today would be extremely helpful.

The charter introduces a host of other changes, some of which are more welcome than others. The National Audit Office already helps to ensure that the BBC delivers value for money to licence fee payers, so we have no objection in principle to extending its role so that it scrutinises the parts of the BBC that spend public money. We have some concerns, however, about the expansion of the NAO’s remit to cover parts of the BBC that are not directly funded by the licence fee, particularly BBC Worldwide. There might be a danger that allowing the NAO to access BBC Worldwide’s books could place it at a commercial disadvantage, so that risk will need to be addressed.

The charter attempts to resolve that possible problem by stating that the NAO cannot question any “creative or editorial judgements” on the grounds of value for money, but it also allows the NAO to define exactly what that phrase means. It will need to be defined more precisely in the charter in the future. Will the Minister be able to provide us with some comfort that it will not be interpreted too widely? An independent dispute resolution process needs to be established so that disagreements between the NAO and the BBC can be resolved.

We give cautious welcome to the proposal that Ofcom becomes the BBC’s regulator. I have already mentioned the critical role Ofcom will play in monitoring diversity, and it will also monitor distinctiveness and consult the industry on its new operating framework next year.
Given the issues at stake, can the Minister confirm that Ofcom will also consult Parliament and the public about this matter? The BBC Trust struggled to reconcile its twin roles of the corporation's regulator and its cheerleader. It is right that these two functions and responsibilities, which were often confusing and sometimes contradictory, are to be officially separated.

We welcome the fact that the majority of appointees to the BBC's unitary board will now be drawn from the BBC, rather than being appointed by the Government. We note that that was not the Government's original intention, but I commend them for performing a heel turn and pivot on that issue—Ed Balls would have been given a 10 from Len if he had managed to pull that off with such style. As Lord Foster of Bath said in the other place, the fact that the Government appoint the chair of the new BBC board and the chair of Ofcom raises questions about their independence. Does not the Secretary of State agree that one way of guaranteeing independence would be to require that every non-executive is independently appointed?

The new charter rewrites the BBC's 90-year-old mission statement. The commitment to be “impartial and distinctive” has been added to the time-honoured duty to “inform, educate and entertain”. We need assurances from Ministers about that, because distinctiveness is poorly defined, and Ofcom has admitted that it is still working out exactly what it means. Distinctiveness is a vague notion, and there is a risk that the BBC's commercial rivals could use it as a stick with which to beat the BBC whenever they wish.

Despite these reservations, I sense that this Secretary of State wants to create a new climate in which the future of the BBC can be discussed without political posturing. I do not think she wants to return to the days when David Cameron could describe the prospect of cuts to the nation's favourite broadcaster as "delicious". The new approach is welcome. As I said, I believe that the Secretary of State has the BBC's best interests at heart. I can detect no desire on her part to use the BBC to advance his own political agenda.

We will work with the Secretary of State to secure the future of the BBC. Let us hope that this is a new benign era for the Beeb. After all, when Government Ministers are loudly complaining about you in public, when Back-Bench Government MPs insist that you have an inbuilt left-wing bias; when Front-Bench Opposition MPs insist that you have an obvious right-wing bias; when the left-wing columnist, Owen Jones, says you are a threat to democracy; when the Foreign Secretary finds you infuriating; when politicians and activists of every stripe and persuasion think you are against them; when two thirds of the British public see you as a bastion of editorial excellence and journalistic integrity; and when the American public would rather get their news from you than from their own news sources, there is one thing the BBC can be sure of—it is doing things right. We should be proud of one of the nation's greatest assets.
BBC’s appointments is important, but nevertheless has to take account of external factors. Let me explain that that particular paragraph is word-for-word identical to the paragraph in the agreement published in 2006, when the Labour Government were in office. It simply translates the same provision from 2006 into the new agreement. So if there was a sinister purpose, it was the creation of the hon. Lady’s party, not that of the present Government.

There was then a debate about the fact that, obviously, the unitary board was a more powerful and directly responsible body than the trust. It was recognised, I think, that it was right for the appointment of the chairman to remain a Government appointment, although my own view was that because the board was such a new creation there should be an open competition, and that was the view that the new Secretary of State and the new Prime Minister subsequently reached following the publication of a report by the Select Committee. I think that that was probably the right decision.

The Government appoint the four independent directors, each of whom will represent or speak for one of the nations of the United Kingdom, and, as has been pointed out, the BBC will appoint five non-executive directors. Even the Government’s appointments will, however, be made through the public appointments process. As I have said, they will not be in the majority. Perhaps most crucially of all, the unitary board will not have a role in editorial decision-making, although it will have a role in reaching judgments about complaints post-transmission. That crucial safeguard will ensure that those people cannot be accused of political interference.

I find it extraordinary, I must say, that all the people who suggested that the creation of the board somehow constituted a threat to the independence of the BBC—although, as was pointed out, it would have no involvement in editorial decision-making—have been strangely silent about what strikes me as a more dangerous precedent: the appointment of James Purnell as director of radio and education. When the BBC appointed James Purnell as director of strategy in 2013, just three years after he ceased to be a Labour Member of Parliament and about five years after he ceased to be Secretary of State, I questioned the director-general about the appointment in the Select Committee. I asked him whether he could think of any precedent for the assuming of a management role in the BBC by someone who was not just politically affiliated, but had been a very active party politician. He could not do so, but he did say this to the Select Committee: “I think the key thing is—James’s job of course is not editorial”. James Purnell has now become director of radio and education. As director of radio, he has overall responsibility for the output of a large amount of BBC content, and it is impossible to say that he has no involvement in editorial decisions. Indeed, we are told that he has been groomed as a potential candidate for the job of director-general, a position which, of course, is also that of chief editor of the BBC.

I like James Purnell. We get on well, we have robust discussions, and we agree about quite a lot. I have absolutely no doubt that James Purnell is absolutely committed to the impartiality of the BBC, just as I am; I merely suggest that it is not as well as a former Secretary of State were to be invited, in a few years’ time, to take on a management role in the BBC—[HON. MEMBERS: “I’d back you!”] I suspect that, despite the support that I might enjoy from some on my own side, it would give rise to howls of outrage, and I do not think it would be appropriate. This is not to criticise James Purnell, but his appointment does establish a very dangerous precedent, which is far more of a direct threat to independence than the appointment of the non-executive, independent directors.

Helen Goodman: The right hon. Gentleman is making a fair point. What it all goes to show is that more appointments of this kind should be made through independent processes, and that is precisely our criticism of the new board structure. The right hon. Gentleman has just given another example in which the independence comes into doubt.

Mr Whittingdale: The hon. Lady has made an interesting point. The Government have no involvement in the appointment of management executives in the BBC, and—this is another issue—we understand that, just as there was no competition when James Purnell was appointed director of strategy, there was no advertisement or external competition for this particular post. However, that is a matter for the BBC. It is something that the Select Committee has previously questioned quite vigorously, and although I am no longer a member of the Select Committee, my successors may well wish to take it up with the director-general in the future. I hope that they will.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that James Purnell had a career in the media before becoming a Member of Parliament—he was a special adviser at No. 10 in that area—and that there is a general view that he has done a very good job? He is a good friend of mine, but is not the real purpose of advertising to ensure that we do not just get white men who are hand-picked for such jobs? That must be the criticism, rather than, necessarily, James Purnell’s own background and the expertise that he clearly possesses.

Mr Whittingdale: I am not sure that the fact that James Purnell was a member of Tony Blair’s policy unit is hugely reassuring to me. As for the right hon. Gentleman’s point about the need for diversity, it has already been covered in the debate, and I absolutely sign up to it. The right hon. Gentleman has acknowledged and welcomed the point about the need for diversity, it has already been covered in the debate, and I absolutely sign up to it. The right hon. Gentleman has acknowledged and welcomed the fact that we have included it in the BBC’s public purposes for the first time. I think that the BBC is committed to trying to increase diversity, but, as has already been said, there is more to be done.

Damian Collins: The appointment of James Purnell to his new role is important not just in relation to James Purnell himself, but in relation to the process. This is one of the most senior positions in the BBC, and there is no internal or external advertising of that position. There is a great deal of criticism of the way in which BBC executives are appointed and how much they are paid, and an element of transparency and competition is important in that context.

Mr Whittingdale: I entirely agree that that is an important issue, but I think that the issue of the political precedent is, if anything, even more important. People complained vigorously about the suggestion that the Government might appoint, as non-executive independent
[Mr Whittingdale]

directors, people who might be political friends. That caused howls. This, however, is not an independent position. It is not a non-editorial position. It is a position within the management executive which involves responsibility for editorial content. Obviously, it is a much more directly responsible position, and it is therefore even more important that it should be politically independent.

John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): This, of course, makes it all the more remarkable that when the right hon. Gentleman was Secretary of State, Rona Fairhead was appointed chair of the new BBC board by the Prime Minister with—as we subsequently discovered—absolutely no competition, and behind closed doors.

Mr Whittingdale: She was originally appointed following a very open and widespread competition when she became chairman of the BBC Trust. Obviously that post was advertised, there were a number of candidates, and the process was subject to the full public appointments procedure. The fact that the then Prime Minister and I told the House that it was felt that she could serve during the transition following a transfer to the new position is a matter of public record. However, as I said earlier, I think that the later decision that it would be better to put the post out to open competition was the correct one.

Maria Eagle: The BBC may or may not have made a mistake in the way in which it appointed a particular individual—James Purnell, about whom the right hon. Gentleman has been talking—but it made that decision as an independent organisation. Is not the difficulty that we face, and the issue of political interference, caused by the fact that we in this place seek to control? When the right hon. Gentleman was Secretary of State, it was argued that the appointment of a majority of board members by the Government of the day was a matter of concern, because it was felt that there would be a route for political interference from this place and from the Government, rather than the BBC’s making its own mistakes—or not; as it may or may not do.

Mr Whittingdale: That was obviously a separate debate. I understand the concern expressed by the hon. Lady, but I do not agree with her. Even under the original suggestion, the BBC would have had a majority when the non-executive and executive board members were taken together. Moreover, as I sought to point out, the non-executive members will have been through the public appointments process. They will have had to demonstrate their competence and qualifications for the role, which most people regard as a pretty good safeguard. Of course, the BBC Trust, which the board replaces, was wholly appointed by the Government, so this is quite a big shift.

Sammy Wilson: Apart from the political connotations of the appointment, does the right hon. Gentleman not find it even more bizarre that, because of either the perceived inexperience of the appointee or other internal factors, the BBC has had to create another management post to support Mr Purnell, with a salary of more than the Prime Minister’s, at a time when it says it has no money?

Mr Whittingdale: Again, the hon. Gentleman raises some valid points. There are a number of curiosities about this appointment. As I indicated earlier, I am sure the Select Committee will want to think about some of them when the director-general next appears before it.

I want to touch on a couple of other aspects of the agreement and charter, which, as I have said, I very much welcome. The introduction of distinctiveness as a key requirement for the BBC is important. It is right that an organisation that enjoys £4 billion of public money should not be competing with the independent sector, and that it should look different from the commercial sector in television and, just as importantly, in radio. I hope that putting that in and then having Ofcom adjudicate it will make a difference.

Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con): I agree on the distinctiveness point, because the BBC receives this public money, but does my right hon. Friend agree that the distinctiveness should go across all the channels, as opposed to the BBC just putting some distinctive programmes on certain niche channels? It should be spread across the whole range of the BBC, not just concentrated on a small element of it, leaving the major channels free not to be as distinctive as arguably they should be.

Mr Whittingdale: I agree, and it will ultimately be for Ofcom to decide whether the BBC is meeting that requirement. I do not think it should be applied to every individual programme, but each channel should be able to demonstrate that it is markedly different from an equivalent commercial channel. That should apply to radio as well as the mainstream TV channels. That is a significant change.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): When the right hon. Gentleman was Secretary of State, did he ever look into the disproportionate amount of money distributed to the regions in comparison with London? I am sure the right hon. Gentleman knows that some of the regions are very concerned about that.

Mr Whittingdale: I understand that, and there are particular regions—and indeed nations—that feel underserved and hard-done-by. In my view, the BBC made a good move in transferring a lot of its production and facilities to Salford—I was in favour of the establishment of the Media City in Salford—but that was not sufficient for the BBC to then sit back and say, “Right, we’ve done our bit for the English regions; we don’t have to worry any longer.” The west midlands has felt underserved, as has been debated in this House, and I have no doubt that the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson), speaking for the Scottish National party, will talk about the provision of the service, and indeed employment and production, in Scotland. This is a live issue, and I believe the BBC needs to do more.

I want to touch briefly on two particular policy developments that I promoted and remain keen on. The first is the public service content fund. The hon. Member
for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson) talked about the underspend on the provision for broadband and what will happen to it. I hope it will go to establish the public service content fund, which will provide programming in areas that are currently underserved, of which children’s television is certainly an example. It will be administered outside the BBC.

Mr Watson: Does the right hon. Gentleman not think that there may be a chance with that development of an onerous bureaucracy being created that may cost the licence payer more, and may mean that the expertise in commissioning content is diminished?

Mr Whittingdale: I very much hope that there will not be additional bureaucracy. The precise way of administering it will need to be worked out. There is a valuable consequence of this: this is a very small pot of money, but it will mean that there is an alternative route—other than the BBC—for the obtaining of funding from the public purse for public service content. At present, the BBC has a monopoly in commissioning content with public money. That is in large part necessary, but it is worth exploring this alternative route.

Mr Watson: My memory is not great and I have only been reading into the brief for 10 days, but I think that the figure is about £60 million. Does the right hon. Gentleman envisage that being an ongoing demand on the BBC, or will it be a one-off pot as a result of the underspend?

Mr Whittingdale: Where the money is coming from has been identified: it is coming from the underspend, as the hon. Gentleman flagged up in his remarks, and that is obviously over a set period; it is not ongoing. We will judge the success of it. It will be to some extent for the BBC to decide whether it is a success, and also for the Government to decide, but I am content that, certainly for the next three years, it is in place.

The other innovation I am very committed to, and to which the director-general has given a lot of support, is the provision for the BBC to support local media through the establishment of local news reporting and the buying-in of content. The purpose of that is first to address an extremely serious issue: the decline of local media and the consequences of that for local accountability and democracy. This alone is not going to solve that as it is a very big issue, but it is a recognition that the BBC has taken content from local newspapers often without even attributing it to the local paper, let alone giving any money for it. This will ensure that local newspapers continue to cover local institutions—local councils, courts and so forth, which are extremely important for the functioning of local democracy. It seems to me a legitimate use of the licence fee to do this and I welcome the BBC making it clear that this has been identified: it is coming from the underspend, even attributing it to the local paper, let alone giving any money for it. This will ensure that local newspapers continue to cover local institutions—local councils, courts and so forth, which are extremely important for the functioning of local democracy. It seems to me a legitimate use of the licence fee to do this and I welcome the support the BBC has given to this move. It is important that the BBC should not directly employ these people: if it turned out that a local newspaper could reduce their employment even more because the BBC would pick up and employ those people, it would further harm local media rather than helping. The important thing is that, through a tendering process, the BBC establishes a relationship in each area with a local media organisation—it does not need to be a newspaper: it could be a radio or television station—and supports it in ensuring that there is proper coverage of local political issues. That is new, and I hope it will help to sustain local media and local democracy in this country.

Finally, I want to touch on the future of the licence fee. I think I have been quoted in the past as saying that the licence fee was worse than the poll tax. When I said that, it was simply an observation that the licence fee is a flat-rate charge payable by every household and, unlike the community charge, no help is available even for those on very low incomes. It was simply an observation of that. The licence fee has many flaws—it is regressive, it is hard to collect, and there is the iPlayer loophole enabling people to evade it, which we are now closing—but I think the Government are right that for this charter period the licence fee should continue. The speed of change in the way that people receive television is very fast and there may well come a moment when the technology has advanced so that the old argument that everybody consumes the BBC in one form or another is no longer true. Also, if television is distributed via the internet, which is coming and I believe will eventually be the universal method of distribution, that will be the moment when it is possible to experiment with things like conditional access subscriptions. I therefore welcome the fact that the BBC has agreed to put a small toe into the water and use the iPlayer perhaps to supply some additional content on a voluntary subscription basis. That is a small step, but it will shed light on our potential to move towards a voluntary system of subscription to the BBC. The technology does not permit that now, and I do not think it is appropriate now, but I welcome the fact that the BBC has agreed to make that first small step.

I conclude by saying once again that I believe the draft agreement and charter represent a sound foundation for the future of the BBC. I would like to take some small credit, despite all those who told me I was hell-bent on destruction. That was not the case, and I hope this proves it.

2.49 pm

John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I beg to move the amendment in the name of my right hon. and hon. Friends.

The BBC is one of the most important and influential cultural, social, economic and democratic institutions in our country, and I welcome this opportunity to debate its future further. I think we all agree on many things, including how important the BBC is, but there is also significant agreement on the areas in which we criticise it.

The new shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson), illustrated very effectively how worried many of us are about the lack of diversity in the organisation, and the debate initiated by the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) on diversity in the BBC won widespread agreement throughout the House. There is a shocking shortage of senior black and minority figures at the very top of the BBC. We all believe that the BBC should reflect the nation. When we turn on the television, the nation should be reflected back at us, but too often it is not. We do not see enough black and minority faces on screen. There are also not enough lesbian and gay people in senior management positions or, more importantly, on screen as authority figures, where they should be seen. I have made this point before. The BBC has always been absolutely fantastic at attracting gay people into comedy roles and on to game shows, but they are not the authority figures who present the news, as they should be.
Mrs Helen Grant: The hon. Gentleman is making an important point, but does he agree that off-screen and back-office representation is just as important?

John Nicolson: Indeed I do. That is a very fair point. The BBC would probably argue it has been effective at hiring minority figures backstage and at the more junior levels, but the real problem arises when it comes to promotion. That is very obvious when we see the most senior presenters on screen or when we are in meetings with the most senior management figures. The BBC clearly has to address these concerns as a matter of urgency. It is great at setting targets, but it is not so good at actually delivering them. They are often set years in advance, and by the time we get to the end stage, we have all forgotten what the target was in the first place, so it sets new targets for us to get excited about. It is time for that to stop. It is time for the BBC to deliver.

I associate myself with the widespread criticism of the agreement over the licence fee for the over-75s. That deal was done in secret between BBC managers and the Government. When Tony Hall appeared before us in the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, he told us that his staff were delighted with the deal. I had to pinch myself. Anyone who has spent a nanosecond talking to any of the BBC's staff knows that they thought it was absolutely disastrous because of the effect it will have on programme-making budgets. Also, importantly, it is not the role of the BBC to deliver social provision. The BBC is a broadcaster. It is the Government’s role to deliver social provision. This was clearly not a satisfactory development, and it is one that we deplore.

I suggest that the BBC management should have taken a leaf out of Channel 4’s book. When faced with a deal that did not look as though it will be good for them, they should have phoned a couple of politicians who were on their side to see whether they could intervene on their behalf, rather than negotiating in secret. That negotiation turned out to be disastrous because they were not that good at doing deals behind closed doors. If they had asked their pals for a bit of assistance, they might have done better.

Ian Murray: The hon. Gentleman is making an important point about those negotiations. To be fair to the BBC, however, the blame lies with the Government, who took the BBC to the brink and then offered it a deal that it had no choice but to accept.

John Nicolson: Except, of course, that the previous director-general, when faced with precisely this threat, threatened to resign. The Government blinked first on that occasion. The BBC has enormous power if it plays its cards well.

Sammy Wilson: Does the hon. Gentleman not accept that the BBC probably breathed a sigh of relief at getting off so lightly in that deal? It now has an increased licence fee and a five-year review, which probably means nothing, but it has had enough money this year to increase its wage bill by £21 million.

John Nicolson: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point about BBC salaries, and I shall say more about that later. They are ludicrously inflated at senior levels. The director-general often says, “We pay these huge salaries because that is the going rate in the outside world.” The BBC does not actually know that, however, because nobody ever wants to put it to the test by leaving a senior post in the BBC. They know that they will never achieve such high salaries in the outside world. I asked the director-general if he had ever conducted a study on what his senior staff got when they left the BBC and went into the industry outside. He told me that he had never conducted such a study.

Mr Jim Cunningham: I am sure the hon. Gentleman would agree that in any other business, whatever it might be—even local government—those outside salary levels would be tested. The market is always tested when setting salaries.

John Nicolson: That is precisely the point I made to the director-general. I asked him whether he had tested this, given that he always argued that he was paying the going rate. His answer was that he had not tested it, so his whole argument for paying people ludicrously inflated salaries fell with that one answer.

As the right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) predicted, I am now going to talk about Scotland. It has been clear for a significant period of time that the BBC is not delivering for Scotland in the way that it should. Audience satisfaction ratings show that Scots do not feel that the corporation fully represents their views and interests. Appreciation measures in Scotland are lower than the average for the rest of the UK, and people in Scotland think that the BBC is poorer at representing their lives in news, current affairs and drama, compared with people in other parts of the UK. Members do not have to take my word for that; the BBC fully acknowledges that problem.

We on the Scottish National party Benches here in Westminster and our colleagues in Holyrood and the Scottish Government are committed to high-quality, well-resourced public service broadcasting, and we want a BBC charter that allows this. Charter renewal has been a valuable opportunity to provide a framework for the BBC that enables it to maintain its important role as a public service broadcaster, to improve its performance for Scottish and UK audiences and to provide further support for the Scottish production sector and those in our wider creative industries. For the first time, the Scottish Government and Holyrood have had a formal role in the charter renewal process, following the recommendations of the Smith commission. The SNP has delivered a clear and consistent message on the straightforward changes we believe would help to transform the BBC in Scotland for the better. We welcome a number of elements in the charter, but it is vital that the BBC now delivers.

The SNP has argued that the BBC needs an enforceable licence service agreement for Scotland and a dedicated board member for Scotland. There are clear reasons for this. A Scottish board would allow BBC Scotland to have greater control over its budget and to be given meaningful commissioning powers. The charter accepts SNP proposals for the BBC to report on its impact on the creative industries for the first time, but it does not make provisions for a fairer share of the licence fee raised in Scotland to be spent in Scotland. Such a provision could deliver up to an additional £100 million
of investment annually in those creative industries. We welcome the commitment to continued support for the Gaelic language, but the Secretary of State refrained from going just a little further and moving towards parity with the Welsh channel S4C for MG Alba, as recommended by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, on which I serve.

The Select Committee supports many of the wider proposals in the draft charter. We welcome the abolition of the BBC Trust and its replacement by a unitary board, although, as I suggested in an intervention on the right hon. Member for Maldon, we were alarmed to see what I will gently describe as the rather relaxed method of selection for the new chair, when Rhona Fairhead moved seamlessly from her old job as chair of the BBC Trust to her new job as chair of the unitary board. The right hon. Gentleman said that the transition period was important because, to paraphrase slightly, the transition meant that she was effectively continuing in the same job. However, Ms Fairhead herself said that it was a completely different job, which is precisely why it should have been subject to open competition, rather than having arisen from a cosy chat between her and the Prime Minister, with no civil servants present. I discovered that during a heated Select Committee cross-examination that resulted in Ms Fairhead accepting that she should perhaps go.

Chris Bryant: The hon. Gentleman had a go at the director-general earlier, but Rhona Fairhead should have been screaming blue murder when the Government were forcing their settlement on her. The whole point of her post is that she is meant to be independent and able to say to the Government, “No. You will not do this.”

John Nicolson: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. That is precisely Ms Fairhead’s role and precisely why many of us found it disturbing that she had been appointed without open competition. What was the quid pro quo for getting a job such as that with no competition? She would have to be truly saintly not to feel slightly beholden to the people who had appointed her in that way.

Scotland’s frustrations with the BBC often focus on the provision of news, which is why I have led the calls for a new Scottish Six. The national news programme, “Reporting Scotland”, is treated as a regional news programme under current arrangements. It is under-resourced and cannot report on news outwith Scotland’s borders. The current six o’clock news does not work in the post-devolution age. Scottish viewers often have to sit through stories on devolved issues that are of no relevance to them, such as English health or English policing. It is a blast from the past and it needs to change.

Ian Murray: Will the hon. Gentleman clarify something about the bit in his amendment about the Scottish Six? During the BBC charter statement last month, the Secretary of State said that “it is for the BBC, which has operational independence in this matter, to determine how exactly”—[Official Report, 15 September 2016; Vol. 614, c. 1060.]

the Scottish Six would happen. The hon. Gentleman tweeted shortly afterwards:

“Good to hear Secretary of State confirm #ScottishSix is a matter for the BBC not government.”

Does the amendment not push the Government to make a decision about the Scottish Six, rather than leaving it in the hands of the editorial commissioning of the BBC, which he has been arguing for in the rest of his speech?

John Nicolson: The hon. Gentleman confuses structure with editorial policy. It is perfectly reasonable for any of us to argue that there should be devolution of broadcasting and structural changes. That is why the all-party Culture, Media and Sport Committee came out unanimously in favour of a separate Scottish Six. It did not presume to tell the editors of a Scottish Six what the content should be. That is an editorial matter. Simply to recommend and advance the cause of the Scottish Six is structural, not editorial. It is important not to confuse the two.

Ian Murray: I want to press this matter, because the Scottish Six is an incredibly important issue in Scottish broadcasting. I am undecided on whether it is a good thing, because I want good-quality Scottish news rather than a forced programme that may not be of the quality that people would expect, but that is a funding issue and a different argument. Is the hon. Gentleman saying that whether BBC Scotland initiates a Scottish Six is an editorial judgment for the BBC or a policy judgment for charter renewal?

John Nicolson: That is a good question. I do not need to tell the hon. Gentleman that this subject has been party political for too long. I am a former journalist. I believe in independent journalism and want to see more jobs in journalism and want Scottish news to prosper. I have always found a certain irony here because people often say in Scottish political debate that there is not enough scrutiny of the Scottish Government. I do not know whether I agree or disagree with that, but that is what some say, particularly those in the Labour party. I am arguing for an hour-long programme in which the Scottish Government can be scrutinised for a full hour. That has to be a good thing. It would provide more opportunities for opposition politicians and more jobs. Crucially, I have talked to the journalists and it is also something that BBC Scotland wants.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John Nicolson: I cannot wait to hear this.

Alberto Costa: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Is that not an argument for the people of South Leicestershire and the other parts of the United Kingdom to hear about the Scottish Government’s failures? Is it not an argument for more Scots news on the UK’s main news, rather than for a separate news bulletin?

John Nicolson: I fear that that is cloud cuckoo land. While I would not presume for one moment to tell the network editors what they should put on the news, I have to tell the hon. Gentleman that if somebody stood up at a newsroom editorial meeting and said, “You know what? I think we should have a 10-minute report on Scottish politics for the viewers of South Leicestershire,” I suspect that they would not get very far.
Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): This is a matter of equality. Welsh speakers in Wales have news programmes specifically for them about Welsh and international matters, but 80% of non-Welsh speakers in Wales do not get the same thing through their screens. I am sure that the same issues arise in Scotland.

John Nicolson: The hon. Lady makes a good point. There is a bit of irony here, because I looked at the Daily Mail after the Select Committee came out in favour of a separate Scottish Six and it condemned the decentralisation of broadcasting on a front page that was itself devolved. The Daily Mail does not run the same front page in Scotland as in the rest of the UK because it knows that the news priorities are different.

Mr Watson: I am enjoying the hon. Gentleman’s contribution. I have not been party political about the Scottish six o’clock news and have never thought about it in detail—I am the new kid—but I am trying to understand whether his position has changed. When I was doing my homework, I found a question from him to the Secretary of State in a recent debate in which he said:

“Does the Secretary of State agree that the matter of a separate ‘Scottish Six’ is entirely the responsibility of the BBC?”—[Official Report, 15 September 2016; Vol. 614, c. 1060.]

The hon. Gentleman seems to contradict that in his speech this afternoon. Has his thinking changed?

John Nicolson: I am delighted to explain. In answer to my questions, both the former and current Secretaries of State said that, while agreeing that Scotland was under-served and accepting the BBC’s analysis that it is not trusted in Scotland, the job of news was to bring the nation together. I do not believe that it is. The job of the BBC is to report without fear or favour and to provide the best possible news for its viewers, rather than acting as a cheerleader for one constitutional settlement or another. The BBC should devolve as much as possible. I believe in the concept of a separate Scottish Six. Politicians should stand back and allow the BBC to decide the form and content of that programme—[Interruption.]

If the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) wants to ask me a question, he is free to, but if he mumbles, I cannot hear him.

Alberto Costa: I thank the hon. Gentleman once again for his generosity. Was it not SNP activists who bullied BBC Scotland during the Scottish independence referendum debate, alleging that the editorial content on its news programmes was biased?

John Nicolson: There was a vigorous debate in Scotland in which both sides accused each other—[Interruption.] I heard the hon. Gentleman; he does not have to repeat himself. Both sides accused each other of bullying. The BBC said that it should have learned lessons from the referendum campaign, and there is an important argument about exactly how the BBC should cover referendums. The coverage when there is a binary choice should be different from that during a multi-party election and I think the BBC accepts that it covered the referendum campaign like a general election rather than a binary choice. The BBC got itself into a bit of a fankle because it said—defending itself immediately as it tends to do—that there were no lessons to learn and that no mistakes were made. Almost immediately after, however, it said that it must learn the lessons of the Scottish referendum campaign for the way in which it covered the European Union referendum campaign. That is intellectually incoherent; it cannot say, “Our coverage was perfect,” and at the same time say, “We will learn the lessons from the previous campaign.”

Ian Murray: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John Nicolson: I will take one more for the road.

Ian Murray: I am very grateful, as the hon. Gentleman has been incredibly generous with his time. We want to support your motion, so will you give clarity about what it actually says? Are you saying that a Scottish Six,
in the BBC News Scotland context, is an editorial decision for the BBC in Scotland—I hope that is what the motion says—or that you are looking to make this a policy decision in the charter? The latter would not be desirable, and I think he is arguing the same.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. A lot of people are using the word “you” when they mean hon. Members. I gently remind people that when they say “you,” they are referring to the Chair.

John Nicolson: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is important that there should not be political interference in the decision about whether or not there is a separate Scottish Six. I have made this point repeatedly. I am encouraging the BBC to continue fearlessly with its current proposals, to continue with the pilots and to provide jobs and investment in the way that it wants to do and that its staff want to do. The BBC is rich in talent and creativity. Its strength is its extraordinary workforce. We have, in the course of our charter deliberations, made clear our passionate support for public service broadcasting. Where we have offered criticism, we hope we have been constructive, and much of our criticism has been accepted by the BBC. We urge it now to translate its aspirations into delivery.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. For the avoidance of doubt, let me say that at the beginning of the hon. Gentleman’s speech he attempted to move the amendment, but he was speaking to the motion. He will be called to move the amendment formally at the end of the debate.

3.14 pm

Mrs Helen Grant (Maidstone and The Weald) (Con): Much of today’s debate will doubtless focus on issues such as governance, compliance, regulation, independence, distinctiveness and financial stability, but I wish to use my time to raise again an issue that is far too often pushed to the margins: diversity and equal opportunities.

Last week, I attended the launch of the BBC’s “Black and British” season. It was at a hotel in Soho and it was well attended. The event gave us a glimpse of some bold, vibrant stories, intended to overturn various misconceptions and to challenge the orthodox. The aim was also to show what it really means to be black and British today. I must admit that when I arrived I was a little sceptical, but when I left I was a little emotional, because I had been taken on a journey back to the ’40s, ’50s, ’60s and ’70s, and then forward into the future, with a documentary speculating on whether we will ever have a black Prime Minister, by some brilliant, diverse writers, presenters, broadcasters, directors and producers. I think I witnessed the BBC operating at its very best, and I felt very proud of the institution and proud to be British. I felt excited about the future.

This desire and commitment to have even greater diversity at the BBC seems very genuine, and pretty well reflected in the draft charter and agreement, but there are three areas where clarification from the Secretary of State or the Minister for Digital and Culture, either in the wind-up or later in writing, would be helpful. I also wish to make one or two remarks about Ofcom.

First, although the Department for Culture, Media and Sport has published helpful information sheets on a large number of policy areas, no information sheet appears to have been produced on diversity and equal opportunities. I therefore ask the Secretary of State or her Minister to look into providing a comparable document as soon as possible.

Secondly, the draft charter states: “The BBC must ensure it reflects the diverse communities of the whole of the United Kingdom in the content of its output, the means by which its output and services are delivered (including where its activities are carried out and by whom) and in the organisation and management of the BBC.”

Will the Secretary of State or her Minister please confirm that that diversity requirement applies to on-screen and off-screen employment from all suppliers, both internal and independent?

Thirdly, the agreement requires the BBC to promote equal opportunities in relation to disability, race and sex; to make people aware of its arrangements to achieve that; to review the arrangements; and to publish a report at least once a year on the “effectiveness of the arrangements”. On that latter requirement, I respectfully ask the Secretary of State and her Minister to pay special attention to the word “effectiveness”, because we need to know what works and what does not work.

Too often in my life—in my experience both as a lawyer and a politician in this place—I have heard institutions boast good practice or best practice, but then found that good practice or best practice do not mean effective action, and we really do need effective action here.

Finally, Ofcom as a regulator is responsible for ensuring that the BBC’s diversity requirements are realised. I confess that in the past I have not been overly impressed by Ofcom’s response to statutory equality duties, but it now has a new chief executive officer who has promised a harder-edged approach to diversity. She has also mentioned quotas and, if necessary, ring-fenced funding. I hope that Sharon White’s words are reflected in action, and I shall watch very carefully.

Helen Goodman: The hon. Lady is making a characteristically powerful speech. Given the diversity of the population under the age of 18, does she agree that it is particularly important that we have a home-grown capacity for making children’s programmes so that the programmes that children watch reflect the communities in which they live?

Mrs Grant: The hon. Lady makes a very good point. I would be extremely interested to look into that sort of idea.

On the basis that transparency drives diversity, I also hope that Sharon White will require full publication of the BBC’s diversity data, with Ofcom providing commentary and the essential evaluation.

Many people listening to this debate today have worked so, so hard for years to advance diversity in the arts and creative industries. There is still much to do and still a way to go, but I do feel that we are on the brink of some real progress. I therefore take this opportunity to pay tribute to the former Culture Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), and to all those committed individuals both inside and outside Parliament such as Simon Albury of the Campaign for Broadcasting Equality who never seemed to give up.
3.22 pm

Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): May I begin by saying to colleagues around the Chamber that, since I stood down from the Front Bench in June, I have agreed to take on the secretariaship of the all-party parliamentary group on the BBC?

I welcome the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and the Minister for Digital and Culture to their places. Both of them are new to the job but not to government. I also commend my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson) for his debut at the Dispatch Box in this role, and I wish him well.

Although the new Ministers have come late to the process of BBC charter renewal, it is now for them to finish off all the work that has been done so far. I am glad to see that some of the more lurid fantasies of the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), whom I am really pleased to see in his place, will be well and truly finished off by the time the new charter becomes operational.

I am sure that the Secretary of State and the Minister have realised already the incredibly high esteem in which the BBC is held by our constituents, who pay for and consume its services, and the concomitant interest and campaigning about the process of charter renewal. There is a wish around the country, the nations and the regions that the Government get this charter right.

Let me give the Government some credit—not something I often do. The end result looks like it will be better than many of us had feared. Let me also be clear that one or two concerns remain, and I will come on to mention them in my remarks.

When we consider the future of the BBC, we should always keep in mind both its great history at the centre of our national life—Members do that when they make their doors. It is behind only the monarch, our armed forces and the national health service in the esteem in which it is held, so loved and valued it most certainly is.

The consultation on the Green Paper as part of the charter renewal process review simply reiterated the extent to which that is so. Those of us who knock on the doors of our constituents and try to get them to approve of what we do in our jobs can only look on in awe at an 81% approval rating—81% of the public believe that the BBC does a good job. We would all wish for such a high level of approval from those for whom we seek to work.

That high approval rate is combined with the fact that a very high number of people in this country—some 97%—consume BBC services for an average of 18 hours a week. That is an impressive set of figures, which we should all bear in mind when we consider the future of the BBC.

The public have taken part in the charter review period, in so far as they have been able, by way of the consultation on the Green Paper. As the Secretary of State mentioned in her own remarks, some 192,000 people have replied. Three quarters of them believed that the BBC should remain independent, and two thirds that the BBC has a positive wider impact on the market and that BBC expansion is justified. The BBC is also a lynchpin of our creative industries, and our broader creative industries, in the whole of the UK. It allows us to punch well above our weight as a nation in exporting creative output to the rest of the world, as well as being a key component in the soft power on which even our new Foreign Secretary has commented as he starts to get to grips with his new role. Both of those things are even more important after the referendum on 23 June than they were before when the former Secretary of State and I were both still in our places on the Front Bench. We all should be able to agree—I am sure we will—on how lucky we are as a nation to have the BBC. We should use the charter renewal process to make it fit for the future and enable it to continue doing the job that it is doing.

Andrew Bridgen rose

Maria Eagle: Of course I will give way to the hon. Gentleman, who has just come back to his place.

Andrew Bridgen: The hon. Lady talks about how popular the BBC is, and she is completely right, but when 75% of UK adults rely on the BBC for a large amount of their news does she agree that it is very, very important that the BBC is, and is seen to be, impartial?

Maria Eagle: I do agree with that, but it is also important that the BBC is the judge of impartiality and is held to account for it. We should not be able to override it from this Chamber, because we—on both sides of the House—are not impartial.

A good charter must guarantee that the BBC’s editorial independence is beyond doubt. It must guarantee that the BBC’s financial independence will continue and it has to help it to fulfil its mission to educate, inform and entertain. That is the yardstick by which we should judge this charter.

The 11-year length of the charter is a good thing because that provides stability and takes the next review out of the political cycle into which Parliament’s passage of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 had suddenly pitched it. I am, however, still a little concerned that the mid-term review—it will presumably take place after five and a half years—or health check, as Ministers have imaginatively dubbed it, might be deeply destabilising if there is a will in government to exploit that process.

We have been reassured that this will not be a mini-charter review, as is feared. The Minister in the other place, Lord Ashton of Hyde, said that it would consider only governance and regulation, not the scope and scale of the BBC. However, halfway through the charter, a change in governance and regulation from the current proposals could leave things looking very different from how they do at present. When the Minister replies to the debate, will he give us some reassurance about the kind of change that he envisages this mid-charter review—or health check or mid-term review—might seek to make?

The Minister in the other place said that Ofcom will “have to stand the test of time and prove itself”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 12 October 2016; Vol. 774, c. 1995.]

Might this mini-charter review lead to Ofcom being stripped of its regulatory function, if it does not stand up to some test that that Minister seemed to be setting for it? Precisely what kind of review does the Minister for Digital and Culture envisage? When he responds about Ofcom, can he give us the assurance that the Secretary of State did not quite give me in my intervention
on her about the resources Ofcom will be given to carry out its considerably extended role? The right hon. Lady did not say that Ofcom would be given new resources or the resources of the existing trust. We need to know what resources Ofcom will have to do the important and completely new job that it is given under the charter.

Andrew Bridgen: The hon. Lady is extremely generous in giving way; I thank her for indulging me. We will have a new regulatory regime for the BBC. Ofcom will replace the BBC Trust, in which there was no trust. We talk about a health check. If I went to the doctor for a health check and he found that I had some horrible disease, I would expect him to take action. I would expect the Government to take action if, at the health check, the new regulatory regime was found not to be working.

Maria Eagle: The hon. Gentleman employs an extended metaphor. I do not quite understand how that would apply in respect of the mid-term review. I do not know why the mid-term review was not simply dropped. It seems to me that Ministers have been casting about to try to find some purpose for it because they did not want to accept that the mid-term review or the break clause had started out as something different from how it ended up. I am not sure what the role of the review is, so when the Minister winds up the debate, I hope that he will be able to give us a little more reassurance.

It was said in the other place that governance would form part of that mid-term review, so what kind of change to governance, if any, is it likely to make? To what extent might there be some change in the air? If the Government do not like how the arrangements that they set out in the charter are proceeding, will we see a wholesale change at mid-term to the governance of the BBC? What steps will the Government take to ensure that any such changes are as fully scrutinised as the arrangements for the new charter have been? There is not necessarily a parliamentary aspect of the mid-term review or health check.

We had an exchange about governance earlier. I welcome the fact that the Government have abandoned the previous Secretary of State’s attempt to enable the Government to appoint a majority of the unitary board. I welcome which I do not believe was a sensible proposal. The retreat that the Government have agreed to, following discussions with the BBC, is a good one, because they could have led themselves into criticisms that they would rather not have. I think that the development is entirely positive.

I want to say a little about the thorny topic of distinctiveness. What on earth does “distinctiveness” now mean in the context of the charter? We know what the right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) thought it meant. Indeed, today he reiterated in part his view of what it means. We got the distinct impression that anything popular, commercial or with good ratings would not be distinctive enough. He thought that the BBC should be prevented from engaging in any kind of competition with its commercial rivals in this respect, but what does that mean in the context of the new charter?

I think that the definition in the White Paper is fiendish, because “substantially different” can mean whatever anybody wants it to mean. We are assured by Ministers that it will not be applied to individual programming. To be fair to the right hon. Gentleman, I never heard him say that he meant it to apply to individual programming, except in some lurid newspaper stories that seemed to be coming from his Department at the time. The Government have simply left it to Ofcom, which is not used to doing this kind of thing, to work this all out later. In my view, there is still a significant prospect of this being used mendaciously, either by politicians—perish the thought—or by the BBC’s commercial rivals, who might simply want to stop the BBC competing with them by making complaints about distinctiveness.

Sammy Wilson: The hon. Lady makes an important point about the meaning of “distinctiveness”, but does she not agree that there is also an important point about the BBC, with the vast amount of money it acquires from the licence fee payer, having an unfair advantage over other commercial operators? There has to be a way of ensuring that that advantage is not abused to prevent commercial operators competing for good programmes.

Maria Eagle: The BBC ought to be held to account for how it spends its money, whether or not it meets its objectives and its requirements under the charter. I think that that is absolutely fair. We should not get into arguments about whether particular programmes are sufficiently distinctive or different. The definition is a lawyer’s dream, and there are concerns about what it will end up meaning in practice.

We have heard tell of the £60 million contestable pot of licence fee payers’ money. The survival of that pot is a retrograde step, no matter what use it is to be put to. I note that there is supposed to be some kind of pilot and that commissioning children’s programmes is to be involved in whatever is done with the money from the underspend. The fact is that the Government are establishing the principle that licence fee payers’ money should be handed over to the BBC’s commercial rivals to make programmes. That is different from the BBC itself deciding that it might want to commission programming from independent producers, which it of course does a lot of as part of the way it does its business. The problem is that if the contestable pot simply takes money away from the BBC and gives it to its rivals to make their own programmes without any of the guarantees that the BBC would have for maintaining...
ethos and quality, it is no more than a raid on the BBC’s resources. That could be the thin end of what might end up being a very large wedge.

We saw newspaper reports before the White Paper was published about a contestable pot involving a lot more than £60 million. Although the pot is currently small and has been identified as a way of using underspends, the possibility that it will expand over time and that a principle will be established that licence fee payers’ money is not to be used by the BBC to fulfil its mission could be significant. I therefore would like some assurances from the Government that the contestable pot will not be vastly expanded during the period of this charter review. I do not think that it should be proceeded with at all.

I want to say a little about salary transparency. We have heard the argument that publishing the salaries of the so-called talent in the BBC is an issue of transparency. I understand that argument, but I want to put an alternative viewpoint. Far from being about transparency, this is actually a tabloid editor’s dream and a destructive bit of punishment for anybody who wants to work for the BBC rather than a commercial broadcaster. Why is it right to invade the privacy of those who work for the BBC but not those who work for any of its commercial rivals? The Minister in the other place said that this requirement—

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Maria Eagle: No—[Laughter.] I was halfway through a sentence. I might give way to the hon. Gentleman when I have finished it.

The Minister in the other place said that this requirement would not be extended to BBC Studios. BBC Studios will still be using public money—licence fee payers’ money—when it is commissioned to make programmes. Why is it right for parts of the BBC that are in the public bit of the BBC to have to meet this requirement when talent in other places commissioned by the BBC, using licence fee payers’ money, does not? Is this really about transparency, or is it about giving a stick to tabloid editors to have a go at the BBC?

Karen Bradley: The point about BBC Studios is that it is a commercial operation that will compete with other commercial operations. When the BBC commissions an independent company to produce content for it, the people employed by the independent company are not paid directly from the licence fee, so their salary is not declared under these arrangements. We want the same arrangements for Studios as for independent companies to enable competition. However, clearly, we also need to know how much of the licence fee is paid to those independent companies that then go on to make programmes such as “Top Gear” that we enjoy on the BBC.

Maria Eagle: This could lead to unintended consequences. When I was a trade unionist, the idea of comparability and of trying to get a pay rise because somebody else was doing a similar job was grist to the mill. If the proposal simply leads to costs for the BBC’s front-of-camera talent increasing, that might be an unintended consequence. I do not think this has been thought through.

Kwasi Kwarteng: The hon. Lady must recognise that there is a big distinction between people who are paid from the public purse and people who operate commercially in the private sector. The salaries of all of us in the House are publicly known, and it is entirely legitimate for the public to see where some of their money is going as far as salaries are concerned.

Maria Eagle: I understand the hon. Gentleman’s point, but if the ultimate bill is being paid by licence fee payers, why are they not entitled to transparency in respect of salaries just because an independent producer is involved? That is not consistent, and the proposal could have unintended consequences. This seems to be a populist measure, and it does not necessarily do the BBC any favours when it is trying to make sure it gets the talent that is available. It also gives commercial rivals a lot of inside information—published information—to allow them to see what it would take to poach talent. I do not see how that helps the BBC to fulfil its mission. I do not see the point of pursuing this vindictive little measure but, none the less, the Government have said they will implement it, so we will see how it goes.

It is good that we have got to a better place with the charter review than we might have done. From an early stage of the process, the Government seemed to be contemplating shrinking and diminishing the BBC. They denied that, but it was there in the background, and I think that if they could have got away with it, they would have done. However, a huge up-swell of support from our constituents and in both Houses of Parliament has stopped them. There are still pitfalls and problems that might end up being much bigger issues than they now appear to be, however, so we will keep an eye on how things go, especially leading up to the so-called mid-term review or health check. We will be watching to make sure that the Government do not go back to their original aims in the charter review of trying to do down the BBC. On behalf of our constituents who love and value the BBC as a great UK institution, we all hope that this charter does what the Secretary of State now says she wishes it to do, and we will make sure that it does.

3.45 pm

Damian Collins (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State to this debate, although it is not her first as Secretary of State. I thank her for her consideration of the Select Committee’s report and the recommendations during the finalisation of the charter process. I also thank her predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), for the consideration that he gave to the Committee and its work in preparing the royal charter while he was Secretary of State. I welcome the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson) to his place. I know from our time together on the Culture, Media and Sport Committee in the previous Parliament that he will bring all of his great passion and energy to his new role. I look forward to seeing and hearing his contributions in these debates over the coming months and years.
The speech by the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) reminded me of the programme, “Civilisation”. In 1969, the great art historian Kenneth Clark produced an epic series of 13 50-minute-long episodes—a gargantuan undertaking—all about the nature of civilisation. He started off that great series by asking the rhetorical question, “What is civilisation?”, to which he replied, “I don’t know, but I think I recognise it when I see it.” The same formula could be applied to the idea of distinctiveness at the BBC. It is incredibly difficult to define, but somehow we recognise it when we see it. We want a BBC that, in celebrating its great ingenuity and creativity, takes risks that no other broadcaster would take. I am sure that the hon. Member for West Bromwich East agrees that putting Ed Balls in sparkly clothing and making him dance at peak time on a Saturday is something that no other broadcaster in the world would do. The BBC does it well and makes a success of it, and we celebrate its uniqueness.

It is right that along with assessing the BBC’s value for money, the decisions of its executives and how much money they earn, we also continue to apply the threshold of asking, “Is the BBC being true to its creative values? Is it continuing to be distinctive enough and to deliver across the great breadth of its programming, because of the unique way in which it is funded, something that no other broadcaster could do?” The BBC is one of our great national institutions. It is loved by everyone in this country, but that is because it has adapted and changed with the times. It has applied its creativity and ingenuity to the great breakthroughs in broadcasting, be it television, the internet, or the great breadth of digital services that it offers now. It has moved with the times and stayed close and true to its values.

The process of royal charter renewal every decade or so, the next one being in 11 years’ time, is about looking at not just what is best about the BBC that we should conserve and preserve for the future, but how we want it to adapt and change in the future. At the heart of the process has been a desire for much greater transparency in the way that the BBC operates. That is why I was pleased that the Select Committee consistently recommended that the National Audit Office should become the BBC’s principal auditor so that it had a chance to go in there and apply its forensic skills to see the ways in which the BBC is using its resources. That is the right approach to take.

The creation of the new unitary board recognises something that most people had already concluded for themselves—that the BBC Trust was not fit for purpose and not fulfilling its role correctly, and that we could do better. In particular, the dismissal of George Entwistle—which is, in effect, what happened—showed us that in a moment of crisis the chairman of the trust becomes, in effect, the chairman of the BBC, and steps in and intervenes in the way that the chairman of a board would do. That demonstrates that the BBC Trust was too conflicted to be an external regulator of the BBC as well as its principal champion and the representative of the licence fee payer’s interests.

The creation of the new unitary board is the right way forward. It also answers a question that has been asked consistently at Select Committee sittings over the past year, namely: who does the director-general report to? It was not particularly clear who he reported to, but now it is clear that he has independence of operation and his executive team to support him while he remains editor-in-chief, but that, post-transmission, he is answerable to a unitary board of the BBC. That is a much clearer management structure and it is welcome.

The other main proposal worth examining—the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood has mentioned this—is that relating to BBC Studios. The BBC clearly wants, and has got behind, that big initiative. I agree with the director-general’s analysis that making the studios more competitive and open will help make the BBC more creative and enable it to attract and hang on to some of the best creative talents who work not just on screen, but on taking ideas through to production and transmission. If the BBC recognises something that almost all other players in the TV market recognise, it is that the future of television for broadcasters lies not just in the growth of audiences and the transmission of content, but in owning and creating programmes and formats that can be exported around the world. The future of BBC revenues and its future creative success will very much be tied to the success of the BBC Studios proposals.

Alongside the BBC having that freedom to compete, independent production companies will also have more freedom to compete to produce programmes at the BBC. The former Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon, was probably pivotal in pushing that forward; it certainly chimes with the things that he has said about the BBC in the past. The quotas for the BBC to commission out to independents remain, but much more of its commissioning work will now be liberalised, including that for repeat series. The BBC was not prepared to concede on that before, but it complements what it wants out of the studios proposals. I think that we may look back, not just during the review period, but during the next charter renewal, and say that the creative freedom and openness resulting from the studios proposal was one of the most significant reforms of the charter renewal process.

I want to pick up on one or two other points that have been made, particularly on the recommendations of the most recent Select Committee report. We support the decision to run a proper process for the appointment of the chairman of the new BBC unitary board. As other Members have said, it is a different and unique position, and there should have been a proper process to determine the best person. The Committee did not feel that Rona Fairhead should be excluded from that process. She has chosen to exclude herself, but nevertheless there should have been a proper process. The first chairman of the unitary board will hold a pivotal position and play a central role in appointing some of the independent directors, and it is vital that we have total confidence in the way in which they are appointed.

I also concur with the views of other Members—although there may be a difference of opinion on this—on the question of BBC salaries. The BBC had already conceded that executives who are paid more than the Prime Minister should declare their pay. It had also already accepted the principle of very highly paid on-screen performers and talent having their incomes declared, but it set the benchmark at the level of the director-general. Licence fee payers do not understand why on-screen talent is seen as being so different from off-screen talent, with one having to declare their salary and the
other not. That layer of transparency was absolutely the right thing to do, and I am pleased to see it in the final draft of the charter.

Andrew Bridgen: On the need for transparency in appointments, what is my hon. Friend’s view of the appointment of James Purnell as head of radio? That has happened at a time when the BBC is bringing in diversity quotas across all its employment, and yet Mr Purnell got that job with no competition whatsoever. Anyone would think that the job had been made for him.

Damian Collins: It is a new post and it was literally made for him. It was not advertised widely for other people to apply for it. My right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon said in his speech—I said this in an intervention as well—that, regardless of people’s views of the capabilities of James Purnell, or concerns that people may have about his past political involvement, the key thing is the process that was run to appoint one of the most senior directors at the BBC. Why was there no competition within—or, indeed, outside—the BBC involving people who may have had the requisite skills to apply for the job? If we are going to be critical of the way in which Rona Fairhead was appointed as interim chair of the BBC—as I have said, that should have been a clear and transparent process—that should also apply to other senior executives, including those on the BBC board. That certainly applies in the case of James Purnell. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen).

Sammy Wilson: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the transparency applied to those on top salaries should also be applied to those who are on contracts that enable them to avoid tax either by paying only corporation tax on money that is paid directly to them, or by participating in tax avoidance schemes, which the BBC now uses for hundreds of its well-paid employees?

Damian Collins: It is a new post and it was literally made for him. It was not advertised widely for other people to apply for it. My right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon said in his speech—I said this in an intervention as well—that, regardless of people’s views of the capabilities of James Purnell, or concerns that people may have about his past political involvement, the key thing is the process that was run to appoint one of the most senior directors at the BBC. Why was there no competition within—or, indeed, outside—the BBC involving people who may have had the requisite skills to apply for the job? If we are going to be critical of the way in which Rona Fairhead was appointed as interim chair of the BBC—as I have said, that should have been a clear and transparent process—that should also apply to other senior executives, including those on the BBC board. That certainly applies in the case of James Purnell. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen).

Damian Collins: I completely understand the point that the hon. Gentleman is making. People must certainly pay the taxes that are due on the income that they receive, wherever it comes from. That applies to BBC executives as much as to anyone else. I note what the Secretary of State said in her intervention a few moments ago, and I believe that this is something that we must keep under close review. If BBC Talent is trying to use a loophole by channelling more of its income through independent production companies to avoid having to declare it—our concern, through the work of the National Audit Office, is that there has been an acceleration in that process and that people are trying to get around the rule in the new charter that those who earn more than £150,000 should declare what they earn—we should look again at the matter in the mid-point review.

I want to touch on the comments about the Scottish Six made by my friend on the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson). As I was the acting Chair of the Committee and a member of the Committee when we discussed the matter, I was able to give my view on the significance of the Scottish Six. We felt—I certainly felt this, and I hope the hon. Gentleman agrees—that we were calling for the BBC in Scotland to be given editorial independence over the six o’clock news, so that it could reflect the fact that devolution made certain news items less relevant to the Scottish audience than to the rest of the UK audience. We envisaged that the BBC in Scotland would have the editorial independence to make those decisions and the freedom to change the running order of the programme if it chose to do so. The Scottish Six would still be a national news programme, but it would be broadcast from Scotland, it would be produced and edited in Scotland and it would have a Scottish perspective on the national news. We considered the fact that the BBC was comfortable to make that decision with radio, so why should it not consider doing so for television?

That is, of course, an editorial decision for the BBC to make, but one of the things that the Committee hoped to do with this recommendation in the report was to give the BBC a shove and say, “You have been looking at this for quite a long time, you have tried various different formats and you have tried to make a decision. Here is our view, but it remains something for you to do.” I agree with the comments made a few weeks ago by the Secretary of State. I think I am right in interpreting her as saying that, as others have discussed, the Government should not dictate to the BBC what it should do about this; it is a decision for the BBC to make.

Finally, I want to touch on the BBC iPlayer, which has been mentioned. It is important that we remove the loophole whereby people can get out of paying the licence fee by watching programmes—both catch-up and live—on the BBC iPlayer. This also takes us into important new territory that the BBC should explore. By far the most practical way to police such an arrangement would be to give each licence fee payer a PIN that they could put into a portable device to access the iPlayer, to prove that they had paid the licence fee. That is common in other digital services that people use all the time, and it would be the simplest and most logical way to proceed. It would certainly be a lot easier than having digital enforcement cameras—a modern-day version of the TV detector van—going around, trying to work out whether people were viewing the BBC online.

One of the reactions of people in the BBC to such a suggestion is that they do not like the idea of licence fee payers becoming subscribers, or of the BBC becoming a subscription service. I do not think that that would be the case at all. That suggestion is simply an acknowledgement of the fact that new technology allows people to access BBC services in a different way. Those services are still free to access and use for people who pay the licence fee. We would simply be using new technology to make them more readily available.

I believe that a sensible step forward would be to have complementary subscription services that gave people deeper access to the back catalogue and enabled them to stream other programmes that might not be available for broadcast. That would allow the BBC to grow its revenues from its back catalogue and to be innovative in its programme making. It would in no way represent a shift away from the licence fee-funded BBC; it would simply be a recognition of the fact that new technology, platforms and tools will allow the BBC to innovate in ways that simply were not possible in the past. Over this charter renewal process, I would like to see the BBC taking further steps in that direction.
Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): The renewal of the BBC charter is taking place at a seminal moment for the BBC and for the broadcasting industry in general. The dominant position of our public service broadcasters is being challenged by Netflix, Amazon Prime, and cable and satellite TV stations more broadly. As I said in the debate on diversity in the BBC, it is worrying that there has been a trend among ethnic minorities in this country and certainly among first-generation immigrants to return to broadcasters in their original languages and to turn away from the BBC.

Clearly, the BBC is in a unique position both as a national broadcaster and as one of our most cherished institutions, right at the heart of our social fabric and our shared national conversation. At a time in our country when, very sadly, there has been a rise in hate crime and there is a deep concern on both sides of the House and across all political parties about a divided Britain, it is very important that the BBC understands its responsibility—this cuts to the heart of its distinctiveness—to be at the centre of such a shared conversation and of the manner in which we can see reflections of ourselves. Even though I am very clearly on one side of the Brexit debate, I must say that I absolutely want to see reflections in the BBC of people in this country with an older age profile, those from working-class backgrounds or those who live in our seaside towns, as much as I want to see reflections of so many of my constituents, who speak over 200 languages.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I entirely endorse what the right hon. Gentleman has said. Does he agree that the BBC did a very good job during the referendum campaign in holding a fair balance of both sides of the argument? Irrespective of the fact that he is on one side and I am on the other, does he share my slight concern that the BBC has not held that balance quite so well since the referendum came and went?

Mr Lammy: I will not be tempted into talking about the BBC’s coverage during that debate, but given the salaries paid to senior executives and talent, and much has been said about that today, the BBC’s real understanding of the true fabric of this country beyond west and north London, where so many of the executives seem to live—I say this as a representative of a north London constituency—and the way in which it portrays things that are often quite difficult and reaches into places that are quite at odds with each other are genuinely important. The BBC does that not just in its news coverage, but in the sorts of faces that become those that so many of the executives seem to like to turn a way from the BBC.

Mr Lammy: I was the Minister in a previous Government, and it was my belief that there would never be a Minister as good as me, but it turns out that there was.

The draft BBC framework agreement states that the “BBC must make arrangements for promoting...equality of opportunity”, irrespective of gender, disability, race or sexual orientation. Crucially, the draft agreement also sets out that the BBC must publish an annual report on the effectiveness of its policies for promoting equality of opportunity. This is a really important point. In the 16 years since the BBC published its first diversity strategy, it has not published any evaluation of the effectiveness of its efforts. If we are to see real progress, we must first know what works and what does not work. Members who spoke in the debate in April will be well aware that since 1999 we have had 30 BBC initiatives and strategies aimed at improving the representation of black, Asian and ethnic minority communities, but between 2011 and 2015 the proportion of the BBC’s workforce that was from a black, Asian or ethnic minority background has increased by only 0.9% to 13.1%, and only 7.1% of the BBC’s senior leadership in TV are black, Asian or minority ethnic.

It worries me that the BBC is one of the organisations in which we routinely hear language such as, “This person or that person is going to be the next director-general,” “This person or that person will one day be head of drama,” or “This person or that person is at Sky or Channel 4 and we expect them to come across in a few years’ time.” Given the profile of those people, I am likely to bump into them if I happen to go down Muswell Hill Broadway on Saturday afternoon. That is not good enough. We should not have that expectation. We should reach far beyond that. It is just a bit too cosy and we do not want that kind of cosy friends relationship—despite the nice things I said about James Purnell, who is a friend of mine—in at our national broadcaster.

Mr Lammy: I will not be tempted into talking about the BBC’s coverage during that debate, but given the salaries paid to senior executives and talent, and much has been said about that today, the BBC’s real understanding of the true fabric of this country beyond west and north London, where so many of the executives seem to live—I say this as a representative of a north London constituency—and the way in which it portrays things that are often quite difficult and reaches into places that are quite at odds with each other are genuinely important. The BBC does that not just in its news coverage, but in the sorts of faces that become those that so many British people from different backgrounds allow into their front rooms during the day.

We debated diversity in the BBC for the first time on the Floor of the House back in April, and I welcome the new public purpose in the draft royal charter, published last month, which unambiguously commits the BBC to “reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all of the United Kingdom’s nations and regions”.

I am quite sure that, right across the House, we are celebrating that move. May I congratulate the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) on his work on diversity during his time as the Minister for Culture and the Digital Economy? I really enjoyed being a Culture Minister in a previous Government, and it was my belief that there would never be a Minister as good as me, but it turns out that there was.

Mr Lammy: I was the Minister in a previous Government, and it was my belief that there would never be a Minister as good as me, but it turns out that there was.

The draft BBC framework agreement states that the “BBC must make arrangements for promoting...equality of opportunity”, irrespective of gender, disability, race or sexual orientation. Crucially, the draft agreement also sets out that the BBC must publish an annual report on the effectiveness of its policies for promoting equality of opportunity. This is a really important point. In the 16 years since the BBC published its first diversity strategy, it has not published any evaluation of the effectiveness of its efforts. If we are to see real progress, we must first know what works and what does not work. Members who spoke in the debate in April will be well aware that since 1999 we have had 30 BBC initiatives and strategies aimed at improving the representation of black, Asian and ethnic minority communities, but between 2011 and 2015 the proportion of the BBC’s workforce that was from a black, Asian or ethnic minority background has increased by only 0.9% to 13.1%, and only 7.1% of the BBC’s senior leadership in TV are black, Asian or minority ethnic.

It worries me that the BBC is one of the organisations in which we routinely hear language such as, “This person or that person is going to be the next director-general,” “This person or that person will one day be head of drama,” or “This person or that person is at Sky or Channel 4 and we expect them to come across in a few years’ time.” Given the profile of those people, I am likely to bump into them if I happen to go down Muswell Hill Broadway on Saturday afternoon. That is not good enough. We should not have that expectation. We should reach far beyond that. It is just a bit too cosy and we do not want that kind of cosy friends relationship—despite the nice things I said about James Purnell, who is a friend of mine—in at our national broadcaster.

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Mr Lammy: I was the Minister in a previous Government, and it was my belief that there would never be a Minister as good as me, but it turns out that there was.

John Nicolson: Does the right hon. Gentleman recognise that one of the problems in encouraging more people to enter the BBC is that often work experience positions are advertised with no pay, or not advertised at all? People have to be fairly well off to go to work at the BBC for a couple of months without earning a penny piece.

Mr Lammy: It is clearly not possible for a young person, or even a slightly older person, who is not situated in London or does not have parents who can put them up and see them through, to take up those opportunities. It will exclude swathes of people, and the standard has to be higher.

In the previous debate, there was much reflection on other broadcasters, and some people asked me, “Why are you picking on the BBC?” Let me be clear: I will always consider myself a tremendous friend of the BBC. In my own television viewing and radio listening habits, I constantly switch on the BBC and I am really pleased with so much of its output. But because it is the national broadcaster, it has a higher standard. I pay tribute to my good friend Baroness King, who is leaving the UK to go to the United States but who has done a great job as head of diversity at Channel 4. She has led the way, and Channel 4 is being bold on targets, taking
a 360° approach and setting clear guidelines for its independent producers. It is leading the debate consistently, bringing people such as Idris Elba into this place to lead the public conversation. My challenge to the BBC is to say, “We expect you to occupy the same territory and to go further.” It should not be about this House leading the BBC in that direction: the BBC should, to some extent, lead us in the future. We expect a higher standard, and the public purpose should ensure that reflecting and representing the diversity of the UK is embedded into the BBC.

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman is of course right, but more often than not, when we rely on those statements and they come to pass, we miss out on seeing and looking at people who do not fit the mould, most often—I say this with great respect—of the white, upper-middle-class men who have occupied that role in the past. It might have been said about the leadership of the hon. Gentleman’s party in the mid-1970s that “So-and-so is going to take that role,” and Margaret Thatcher did not fit the bill. Of course we get people occasionally breaking through, but I am saying that, really, our national broadcaster has to do a lot more. When we look at the top leadership team over consecutive years and decades, progress in this regard really has been quite slow.

The crucial point is that we need to see progress in terms of the BBC’s latest diversity strategy, which was announced in April and runs to 2020. Off-screen employment is just as important as on-screen employment, as the hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) suggested in her excellent contribution, so a pledge to have a workforce at least as diverse as any other industry is welcome. The make-up of senior management and leadership positions is arguably more important than who is being hired as apprentices or runners, so targets of 50% women, 15% ethnic minorities, 8% people with a disability and 15% LGBT individuals in leadership roles is an ambitious goal, but it represents a huge step forward.

It is important that diversity requirements are embedded into contracts with suppliers and independent production companies commissioned to produce content. Yesterday, the BBC unveiled new commissioning guidelines that make it compulsory for independent production companies to “consider” diversity and state that there will be “a conversation” about diversity plans ahead of all commissioning decisions. One has to ask, what does that actually mean in practice? The new guidelines use the word “consider” 12 times, but do not set out any specific minimum requirements except to have a diversity and inclusion policy in place. In fact, the guidelines only use the word “must” once: people “must” tell the BBC if they cannot work with these guidelines.

The BBC has committed to opening up its budgets to independent production companies by removing all existing in-house guarantees except for news and related current affairs. By the end of the current charter period, 100% of drama, comedy, entertainment and factual hours will up for grabs, and in 2019 competition will also be introduced into children’s, sport and non-news current affairs programmes. In this new “era of the ‘indies’” this will become increasingly important. If the BBC is serious about reaching the ambitious targets it has set for itself, it needs to be clear about what is expected of independent production companies. I have to say that guidelines requiring only “consideration” or “a conversation” about diversity appears weak.

In contrast, Channel 4’s commissioning diversity guidelines state that at least one of the lead characters must be from an ethnic minority background, or have a disability, or be LGBT, that at least 15% of the production team must be from an ethnic minority or have a disability and that at least one of the senior directors, editors or producers must be from an ethnic minority or have a disability. That is much bolder. I was watching Channel 4’s “National Treasure” last week—a wonderful four-part drama touching on the terrible issue of sexual abuse in our society. Julie Walters was wonderful, as were her grandchildren. It struck me as I watched the programme with my wife, having put our own mixed-race children to bed, that the two lead white characters were well-known actors, but their grandchildren were mixed race. I thought, “Great! They have done it.” They had reflected gently what was needed—this episode was not central to the storyline—and there it was: a reflection of my family and my children that is rarely seen on television. That is how it can be done, which is why I am surprised that considering or thinking about a conversation is all we have had in the BBC context.

There has obviously been a debate raging for some time; it has been led by Sir Lenny Henry, to whom I pay tribute. We have seen a 400% increase in the number of programmes produced in the English regions and outside the M25 since 2003, which must be a good thing. We celebrate that fact that television is being made in parts of our country where it was not previously made. It brings us back to the business of embedding and hard-wiring diversity as a consequence of the decision. We do not want to lose out because of the attempt to make TV in Wales, Scotland and beyond. I recently met the BBC director of content, Charlotte Moore, and I gained a real sense of her commitment to the issue, which was one I really wanted to raise.

Let me raise again a point that others have made about the now very important position of Ofcom for the BBC. Ofcom’s chief executive, Sharon White, recently warned that the BBC is falling short on stories that reflect all the nations of the UK and their communities. Last year, Ofcom’s review of public service broadcasting found that over half of BAME viewers felt that they were under-represented in public service broadcasting. Ofcom is well aware of the issues, and it is now up to the new regulator to hold the BBC to account if it falls short on its promises. I hope that the Minister will be able to update us in his later remarks on how the Government plan to ensure that the provisions of the charter and agreement are acted on. It seems clear to me that the BBC must be required to publish full data...
on all elements of its diversity and equal opportunities policy and that Ofcom must analyse and evaluate the data to come to a judgment made each year.

Another important point is whether the BBC's targets, which are, after all, only an aspiration, should be combined with a minimum standard or benchmark. I hope that the Minister will confirm today that the Government will call on Ofcom to set the minimum standards for BBC diversity, in terms of both on-screen portrayal and off-screen employment.

We have made real progress on making this issue central in the charter, and I congratulate the Government on achieving that. Now is an important moment for our country, emphasised greatly by the social division that exists in Britain at this point in our history. We do not want to see ethnic minorities turning to first-language stations abroad. We need that national conversation, which must be complex and rich. Difficult though it sometimes is to achieve, a lot of people are paid quite a lot of money to get this right. Now is a time when we must get it right, so that I am not here in five years' time having the same debate about ring-fencing, targeting and the BBC taking diversity seriously.

4.19 pm

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): I am grateful for the chance to speak in this important debate, and I greatly welcome the publication of the draft charter. It is worth recalling that at various points during the run-up to the charter there was some debate about whether we would have to extend it in order to give us time to cover all the bases, as it were. It is great testament to the previous Secretary of State, my right hon. friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), whom I see in his place on the Back Benches, that since the election in May 2015 to today we have a draft charter before us. It is also great testament to him that, as we can see, he does not have two horns on his head and is not carrying a pitchfork. He is not here to consign the BBC to the depths of hell, nor did he intend to do so when he was Secretary of State.

I have absolutely no time for those who think that my right hon. friend the Member for Maldon came to office with an agenda to bury the BBC, and that he was somehow seen off by the might of 38 Degrees and the effectiveness of Labour Front Benchers. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, my right hon. friend is a great supporter of the BBC. He merely made the deeply obvious points that we were going through a deep crisis, and that the whole point of a charter review was to examine what the BBC does and whether it could be helped to do things better.

I used to joke that we could complete the charter review within 24 hours, but it took us slightly longer. However, as Members now know, the review does not shake the BBC to its core foundations, but makes some very welcome and long overdue changes. One of the biggest issues that we had to consider was whether the licence fee was sustainable, which was a perfectly rational issue to consider. I think it became pretty clear that the licence fee, like democracy, was the "least worst" of the options before us. Nevertheless, my right hon. friend has given the BBC an opportunity to trial subscription services, and he was right to do so, because—as has already been mentioned—the BBC will face extraordinary competition, not from its terrestrial broadcast rivals but from the likes of Netflix, Amazon, Facebook, Apple and Google. It is appropriate that, in a digital age, the BBC should start to consider how best to raise its income, and, indeed, how best to distribute its content.

Not many Members have mentioned radio. We forget too easily, when we talk about the Poldarks or Ed Balls on "Strictly", that a major part of the BBC's output is on the radio. BBC local radio is extremely important, particularly to us in the House. All those people who huff and puff and say "I wouldn't pay my licence fee for this kind of nonsense" are only too happy to wake up to the "Today" programme and go to bed with the Radio 4 midnight news. The BBC does an outstanding job in radio, and it is important for it to continue to do so.

Let me say something about the subject of James Purnell. I do not have a problem with his being an old leftie; what I have a problem with is the fact that he does not seem to believe in digital radio. I am a passionate supporter of digital radio, but James thinks that everything must go on to the internet. My right-wing friends should really want him to be made director-general, because he would probably put the entire BBC online within 24 hours of being appointed. If James is watching the debate—online—I urge him to back digital radio, because I think that it will be the medium through which we listen to radio. It is at a tipping point, and we need the BBC as a very senior partner in it.

I want to touch on four key aspects of the whole charter debate. First, there is the issue of Ofcom regulation. That was part of the reason for my quip about how we could complete the charter review in 24 hours. It seemed to me that the biggest fundamental change on which everyone was agreed was the replacement of the BBC Trust by Ofcom regulation, because the trust clearly did not work.

I have particular praise for the Minister for Digital and Culture and, in her absence, my right hon. friend the Secretary of State—and, indeed, the Prime Minister—because I think they were right to decide, when they came to office, that the chairman of the new BBC Board should be appointed through an open process. If I may echo the words of the hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), that is not a criticism of Rona Fairhead, but I think it was quite wrong that there was not an open process for the appointment of the chairman of an entirely new body, and I am pleased that there is to be such a process now. It is obvious that the BBC Board is completely independent. It always was independent even under the proposals made by my right hon. friend the Member for Maldon before the change of Government, but it is clearly even more independent now, for the benefit of the conspiracy theorists who think we are trying to take over the BBC.

I urge the Government to be as flexible as possible on the detail of how Ofcom goes about the task of regulating the BBC. I have no doubt at all that the chief executive of Ofcom, Sharon White, will do a superb job. Those of us who strongly believe in press freedom should watch out for a Trojan horse, however: if Ofcom is required to
regulate the BBC, we will need to look carefully at how it regulates the BBC’s web content and print-like content. I do not want to see press regulation come in by the backdoor through Ofcom regulating what the BBC does online; I want Ofcom to regulate the BBC’s broadcast content—television and radio.

To my intense pleasure, a great deal of this debate has focused on diversity. I thank the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) for his very kind words about what I have done and return the favour, as I would to my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) if she were in the Chamber, about the work they have done on diversity, along with many others. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon knows, I argued strongly against it behind closed doors and now, liberated on to the Back Benches, I can make my opposition to it public. It seemed to me neither fish nor fowl; it is too small to take on the BBC. It is perfectly valid to argue that having one public service gatekeeper is too few and we need two, but if that is the case we should take £500 million from the BBC—although I do not want to give the Minister any ideas—because £20 million is not enough; it is merely an irritant.

The competitive content fund would also in effect create what the critics of the BBC would see as a new bureaucracy producing content that nobody wanted to see. People have mentioned the importance of having diverse content and children’s content, and I want to see the BBC and all our public service broadcasters making that kind of content. I do not want to listen to a BBC executive in two or three years’ time saying that that is the job of the competitive content fund. I want that content to be on our main screens. We must not allow the fund to let broadcasters off the hook. I am a practical man, however, and if the Minister for Digital and Culture is intent on pursuing the competitive content fund I suggest he give it to the British Film Institute, which at least has experience in awarding public money for making brilliant British films and has a strong commitment to diversity.

I also want to comment on the movement of responsibility for the free licence fee for the over-75s to the BBC. The BBC has been raided on a number of occasions, and the arguments for those raids have varied in their strength. The raid by the last Labour Government to pay for the digital television switchover was potentially justified, because it was argued that the BBC should help to meet the cost of an infrastructure change that would benefit it.

Dr Julian Lewis: One of the more worrying raids, or trades, involving the BBC taking on funding in return for having the licence fee involved the decision that it should no longer receive direct Government funding for that prized open-source intelligence asset, BBC Monitoring at Caversham. May I appeal, through my right hon. Friend, to the Secretary of State in her absence that no decision is taken to implement the current recommendation to close Caversham Park and radically reduce the funding for BBC Monitoring until the Foreign Affairs and Defence Committees have taken the opportunity to visit Caversham Park, which we have been invited to do by the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for Reading East (Mr Wilson)? This is a matter of the greatest concern. The reduction in funding was entirely to be anticipated, but it should not have occurred.

Mr Vaizey: I have just been indulgent to my right hon. Friend because quite a few of my constituents work at Caversham and have been in touch with me to express their concerns. I thank him for his very welcome intervention and I echo his call. I hope that the Minister will pass on to his colleagues in the Foreign Office the need to note the sagacious views of my right hon. Friend and his colleagues on the Select Committee on the future of monitoring at Caversham and how it should be funded and analysed.
Returning to the other raids on the BBC, the digital infrastructure raid was perhaps appropriate. We then took the underspend and spent it on broadband. If the Minister is clever enough, as I know he is, not to proceed with the competitive content fund, we could put more of that money into broadband. I know that he has made incredibly rapid progress on the roll-out of broadband since he took up his present ministerial position, and I know that he will want to reach the new target of 100% by the end of next year. I thought I would just throw that in, because everyone said I was so useless at the job.\textit{\textmd{[Hon. Members: “Aah!”]}} Thank you. This is turning into a pantomime, Madam Deputy Speaker—

\textbf{Dr Lewis:} Oh no it isn’t!

\textbf{Mr Vaizey:} I was about to say that I was going to get things back on track.

The second raid was undertaken by the then new Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt), and me when we froze the licence fee in 2010. That moved the cost of the World Service on to the BBC’s books. Again, that was mildly justified in the sense that some operational savings could be made as a result. The Government have now started to fund the World Service separately.

The third raid related to TV licences for the over-75s, which we mitigated by taking some other costs off the BBC. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon, the man who was supposedly going to bury the BBC, actually secured from the Government an inflation-linked increase in the licence fee to counter the effect of that change.

The fundamental point is that they were raids. It is ironic that successive Governments, and indeed the BBC, have resisted a statutory basis for the BBC because that would undermine its independence. Without a statutory underpinning, however, how much money Ministers might take out of the licence fee is effectively down to their whim and how far they are prepared to bully the BBC. Over the past decade or so, too many Ministers, myself included, have seen the licence fee as a pot into which they can occasionally dip.

I do not propose a solution here, but as someone now liberated from collective responsibility I simply wanted to raise the matter and urge not necessarily the Government but the House to think hard over the coming years about how we protect the BBC. As so many Members have said in this debate, the BBC is a great treasure. It could interfere with editorial judgments and broadcasting things. Its provisions set out no limit to the Government’s thinking on that. Paragraph 67 is headed “Defence and Emergency Arrangements”; there is plenty of time for the debate this afternoon, but the House will be aware that a great many people have indicated to the Chair that they would like to take part. If by self-denying ordinance every hon. Member behaves honourably and speaks for approximately 10 minutes, they will all have an equal chance of participating. If that does not work, I will have to impose a time limit.

\textbf{4.37 pm Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab):} I begin by saying that I chair the National Union of Journalists’ parliamentary group, the secretariat of which is included in my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. It is a great pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), who was an extremely able and successful Minister at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, holding the post of arts Minister for a record six years. He demonstrated again this afternoon that with wit and charm he is able to defend some really poor policies.

The BBC is a first-class institution, but it is now at risk. As everybody knows, Lord Reith’s vision was to educate, inform and entertain free from political interference and commercial pressure. We now have a much weaker commitment to reflect the UK and its culture and values to the world. A large part of the draft agreement, which I thought was a strange document when I read it, between the Secretary of State and the BBC relates to the limitations that will be placed on the BBC’s independence and how it will fulfil its role in a competitive environment. We seem to be moving rapidly away from Lord Reith’s vision.

An early section of the draft agreement deals with the role of the BBC as a UK public service and the public interest test. The agreement states that the BBC must consider public value relative to “any adverse impact on fair and effective competition”.

In other words, when the BBC makes changes to its delivery of the public services set out in the document, its first thought is the impact not on listeners, viewers or citizens, but on its competitors. That undermines the distinctive role of the BBC. When the Secretary of State was appointed, I thought that that was really positive and that we would have somebody in this role who had not spent years in the media milieu and would therefore bring a fresh approach. I was therefore extremely disappointed to discover that she had appointed as her special adviser the former chief political correspondent of The Sun. The obsession with the BBC’s impact on other broadcasters seems to suggest that the hand of Murdoch is evident in the document.

Let us look at some of the specifics in the agreement. Paragraph 67 is headed “Defence and Emergency Arrangements”; but it covers far more than just those things. Its provisions set out no limit to the Government’s power of censorship, and it is possible that the Government could interfere with editorial judgments and broadcasting content. Now let us look at the section on competition. Obviously, the BBC, supported by public money in the form of the licence fee, is in a special position and there are risks of it abusing that position. There was a long-standing argument about whether The Listener was competing unfairly with the New Statesman, The Economist...
and other weekly and monthly magazines, and now the argument is about whether the BBC’s web content is competing unfairly. What is strange about this charter, and this is where it goes wrong, is that there has been a move from the margins—from a small problem that was acknowledged and needed to be dealt with—to place the position of the competitor right at the centre of BBC decision making about what public services it needs to provide. The BBC will have to consider the positive and negative market impact of its activities, and Ofcom must keep that in mind when reviewing new and changed services. There must be concern that commercial broadcasters will be able to launch anti-competitive challenges against the BBC, including to existing programmes and scheduling.

The right hon. Member for Wantage talked about radio, and there is a particular concern about what is proposed for BBC radio. At the moment, the BBC contracts out to the private sector the production of 20% of radio programmes, but it is proposed that by 2022, at least 60% of BBC radio programmes will be contracted out. That is a massive change in how radio programmes are made, and I am concerned about it from two points of view. First, and most importantly, in what sense will we have BBC radio, with its characteristic and distinctive quality, if more than half of it is produced by the private sector? Secondly, there is the question of the practical feasibility of doing this. When more than half the radio programmes are made by external producers, the BBC’s in-house capacity will be limited. Members who are concerned about that matter might like to sign early-day motion 551.

The performance of the last BBC Trust seems to have been absolutely abysmal. I am sorry to say that that was due not to structures, but to the people who were in positions on the trust. It was completely irresponsible of them to take on responsibility for free licences for people over 75. I am pleased that the Prime Minister has insisted on an open appointment for the head of the new structure, but I do not think that the new unitary board, which includes five Government appointees, can truly be said to be independent.

The right hon. Member for Wantage pointed out that there had been a lot of top slicing. Since 2010, if we take account of the freeze on the licence fee and of the constant slicing away of money for different purposes, the BBC has experienced a real-terms cut of 25%, which is extremely significant.

I am pleased that the National Audit Office will be involved in looking at whether the BBC is properly managed, as it seems that its major problems are related to management, not editorial matters. I very much hope that that the growth in contracting out will not simply be a mechanism for people to evade scrutiny regarding high pay.

The Secretary of State began her speech by saying that the BBC is a trusted, valued and much-loved institution not just here in Britain, but across the world. I regret to say that those fine words do not seem to be supported with an approach on the charter that would preserve the BBC free from commercial pressure and political interference.

\[\text{Helen Goodman}\]

\[\text{Kelly Tolhurst (Rochester and Strood) (Con):}\] Many Members have expressed the view that the BBC is indeed one of our most beloved cultural institutions. Each of us will have fond memories of the TV shows that made us laugh and cry, and those that educated and inspired us. To this very day, some of the world’s most famous TV programmes call the BBC their home, or can at least trace their roots back to it. The BBC also has a proud record of supporting and cultivating some of Britain’s most treasured personalities and actors. With the BBC’s global reach, all this goes a significant way towards promoting our place in the world. It is perhaps the largest exporter of our cultural values, and it is viewed by hundreds of millions of people. Some might even say it is our best soft power asset. However, domestic and global habits continue to change, and for the BBC’s importance to be maintained, it needs to change with them.

Our BBC is not perfect, and it has long needed action to address governance issues and changing viewing habits. I was pleased that those issues were highlighted in party manifestos, and that the Government said that it was the time to see them addressed and for solutions to be approved. Like many hon. Members, I have received a tremendous number of representations from constituents who are concerned about the BBC’s future. Given that our constituents pay a licence fee, our communities have a rightful stake in this institution. I am pleased that the new royal charter has been taken seriously and dealt with positively by the Government.

Under the draft agreement, I see a BBC that suits the modern broadcasting and digital environment that we know today. Much has been said about the new governance structure for the BBC. Since the publication of the White Paper, real progress has been made on the subject of appointments to the BBC board through discussion and consultation with the BBC. The fact that the BBC will appoint a large majority of its board members for the first time is indeed a positive measure that clearly maintains its independence.

It is right that all the nations that make up the United Kingdom are represented on the BBC board and that these individuals are subject to the public appointments process. It is also right that those appointments should not be subject to undue political influence. However, it is right, too, that the Government retain a role in appointing non-executive directors to the board of a body that spends £3.7 billion of public money each year. We are talking about huge sums that have to be justified. We cannot allow waste or a lack of openness when it is the public who have such a sizeable stake, yet, with the expanded role of the National Audit Office and Ofcom as overseers of the BBC’s financial and content scrutiny arrangements, I am confident that we will maintain the credibility expected of our public service broadcaster.

The BBC is a huge part of our past, our present and our future. The new charter and agreement will enable improvements that will ultimately address the important issues of governance and modernisation while ensuring the BBC’s independence and enhancing the distinctiveness of its content. I am therefore pleased to support the motion and agreement, which will guarantee the BBC’s important place in our society for many years to come.
4.51 pm

Chris Evans (Islwyn) (Lab/Co-op): It is indeed a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst). I recently bumped into her predecessor at the Welsh Assembly, of which he is a Member. I did not know that he had such strong links to Wales before becoming a Member of that institution, and neither I assume did the hon. Lady.

It would be remiss of me not to mention the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), who was one of the longest serving arts Ministers in this place. I was surprised that, with his wealth of experience, he did not open the debate today. But if it does not work out for James Purnell at the BBC, Lord Hall might be on the phone to him very soon.

We heard two great campaign speeches from the hon. Members for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) and for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant), both of whom are standing for Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee. I would not be cruel enough to make the analogy of Trump and Clinton, but I will say that whoever wins that race, the House will be well served.

John Nicolson: Who’s who?

Chris Evans: Exactly.

Like the NHS, the welfare state and any other well-loved institution, the BBC is sometimes used by left and right as a political football. An observer might get the feeling that some politicians are just waiting for the BBC to slip up so that they can use it as a stick with which to beat it. Like any organisation in the public sector or the private sector, there are bound to be areas where the BBC will get it wrong. However, it is surely wrong in a free society that holds up the concept of freedom of the press that journalists such as Laura Kuenssberg, who are simply doing their job of holding our political leaders to account, are booed and jeered at press conferences and subjected to vile abuse on social media. Equally, when some on the right say that the BBC has some sort of lefty bias, I like to remind them of the recent Ofcom report which threw out 71 complaints against the leader of the Labour party.

My message for those who may be new to the political scene, motivated by certain individuals, is that they have to learn the lesson that politics is a rough old trade and journalists who ask tough questions are simply doing their job. Besides, as my wife, Julia, who was once the head of public affairs at the BBC, has told me often enough, she believed that when both sides were screaming “Bias!” at one another, the BBC must surely be doing something right.

When we look around the world and see some of the state media, we should be particularly proud that the BBC is the home of impartiality. To me it is vital that the BBC retains its independence from Government, not purely from the perspective of freedom of the press, but from a cultural perspective. We are fortunate that in this country we do not have Fox News or some of the shock jocks that we find on the other side of the pond. It is important that we do not have a British version of Howard Stern or Sean Hannity, whose vile right-wing views are seen as legitimate political comment. We should take it as a compliment that that purveyor of press freedom, Rupert Murdoch, has called his own Sky News “BBC lite”.

Around the world, the BBC’s impartiality is looked on with envy. The BBC World Service has provided a window on the world for political prisoners such as Aung San Suu Kyi and Nelson Mandela. That is why the BBC should be encouraged and supported. For me, the central plank of any future charter and framework should be the protection of the BBC’s independence and impartiality. Equally, any agreement should ensure that the BBC is fighting fit, and not only for today’s world, but for the challenges of the future, because, as the decade since the last review has shown, emerging technologies and changing viewing habits can significantly alter the way the BBC is used and what services it provides.

We live in a world of rapid technological change. No one knows how we will view our entertainment in the coming years. It is therefore vital that the Government give the BBC the best possible chance to provide exceptional service. One area that has seen rapid technological change is radio. Far from the days of wireless, radio is now delivered on various platforms, from satellite to digital and internet. The market for radio is now beyond the old debate of FM or AM. The BBC is still the No. 1 go-to organisation for radio. Of the 48.7 million people who listen to radio every week, 35 million listen to Radio 1, Radio 2 or Radio 4.

The BBC also has a web of 40 local and eight regional stations, which combined attract 8.3 million listeners. BBC Radio Wales produces 7,000 hours of original output and more than 2,000 hours of news and current affairs programming. At a time when print media are in decline, it is still BBC Radio Wales that the nation tunes into for its news. My hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) said in an intervention that more of his constituents listen to Radio Stoke than to Radio Wales because the transmitter is closer. When we talk about Wales, we must realise that there is a divide between the north, the south and the west. I would like to see more localisation in Radio Wales’s output.

I share the BBC’s concerns about the proposal that it must have competitive tendering for at least 60% of total relevant broadcasting time for radio by 31 December 2022, according to the framework agreement. In its response to the White Paper, the BBC Trust expressed concern about the significant additional costs of implementing competition. I do not believe that is simply a concern about competition. Lord Hall made it clear in 2014 that the BBC is committed to commissioning the best programmes, regardless of who makes them. The issue here is the rapid way in which that could be imposed under the draft agreement.

According to the National Union of Journalists, there is virtually no market in radio production. Already more than 95% of the total income of broadcast output of all independent radio production companies in the UK comes from the BBC. It is extremely difficult to see how the BBC could increase competitive tendering to 60% by 2022, given the apparent lack of companies to produce the content. Furthermore, the BBC is a world leader in radio production, with a clear focus on providing good public service. A rapid increase in competitive tendering, such as that set out in the draft agreement, could put that in jeopardy. It would be a real loss if the high quality of BBC in-house production was to suffer as a result.
Another dimension to consider is that BBC budgets are constrained. The process and time required to complete commissioning agreements under the draft charter would mean additional costs, meaning less money for content and, above all, talent.

In the light of all those concerns, the question that should be asked is this: why has the Government included that commitment in the draft agreement? Surely it would be in everyone’s interests if competitive tendering took place over a longer period of time, working with the BBC to come up with a timetable that works for everyone. There is simply no need for the Government to rush this.

In conclusion, the BBC is the crown jewel of broadcasting. It should be celebrated for its vital role in promoting Britain around the world. Britain’s international broadcasting. It should be celebrated for its vital role in promoting Britain around the world. It should be celebrated for its vital role in promoting Britain around the world. The BBC has a reputation for fairness, impartiality and justice is founded on the values that the BBC exports. The BBC has a huge appeal nationally and locally. The very idea of it not thriving is alien to the British people. Yet it should always bring good value for licence fee payers and it should be given a place to compete in a rapidly changing world. It should also be a place where programme makers can thrive. Done right, the draft charter and framework can ensure that the BBC continues to entertain and educate for years to come.

4.59 pm

[Chris Evans]

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that when considering the services the BBC can afford to deliver, it should look more often, for example, at some of the large sporting events, to which it often sends hundreds of reporters when a much smaller number would do?

Peter Heaton-Jones: The hon. Gentleman makes a good point. I will come later to some of the ways the BBC should, and indeed should not, be saving money. It is an internal decision-making process for the BBC.

That £3.7 billion is a very large amount, by any measure. It is more than the budget of several Departments. Imagine the outcry if a Department decided it was not going to be open and transparent about the way it spends taxpayers’ money. Quite rightly, that is something up with which we would not put. Yet, still, the BBC seeks to argue that it should not disclose how much public money it pays its top talent. Of course it should. In 2014, 91 BBC directors were paid more than the Prime Minister, and 39 on-air staff were paid more than a quarter of a million pounds a year.

I do not buy the argument that by revealing those individual salaries the BBC would somehow risk losing its stars to the competition. That does not stack up, because in many cases there are no other outlets that would require, want, or have the means to poach those stars. For instance, no other national radio station exists that would consider employing some of the highest-paid talent on Radio 1 or Radio 2. The BBC has to be more open and transparent about how it spends its money, because it is not the BBC’s money—it is the licence fee payer’s money. I therefore support the Government in seeking to build this into the charter.

Radio is the area of the BBC that I know best—specifically, local radio. I worked for the BBC for 20 years, for the majority of that time in local radio. BBC Radio Devon, serving my constituency, is a fine example of BBC local radio at its best. Local radio, in general, is an underfunded service within an underfunded directorate of the BBC—that of regional broadcasting. For about 6% of the licence fee, the English regions directorate produces about 52% of all BBC output. In other words, it is an incredibly efficient service. That includes daily regional TV news in 12 regions, including “Spotlight” in
the south-west, weekly current affairs and politics shows in 11 regions, 39 local radio stations and 42 local websites.

By any measure, that amount of output for that relatively small slice of the BBC’s budget must represent value for money. Yet time and again regional services, and local radio in particular, are singled out by BBC managers for cuts. Perhaps we could understand why if we merely looked at figures on a spreadsheet. The BBC is fond of looking at a figure of cost per listener per hour. Seen purely in those terms, it does seem as though local radio is a relatively expensive service for the BBC to provide. There is a reason for that—it comprises 39 different stations, each a stand-alone operation with its own costs, buildings and overheads. It is entirely unfair, however, to look at it like that and think that the solution is therefore to reduce the hours of local broadcasting that a station provides, to combine stations or to replace truly local programmes with regional or even national shows.

A programme that I once presented has fallen victim to that and no longer exists as a stand-alone local breakfast programme. Members can decide for themselves whether that is to do with the fact that I once presented it, but it is not—it is to do with somebody looking at a line on a spreadsheet and saying, “We can save money by cutting this.” The effect is to take away from our constituents what should be a good local service of news, current affairs and journalism. The BBC should not be doing this. The solution is not to combine stations and replace truly local programmes with regional or even national shows; it is to fund local radio fairly in the first place. The BBC has internally the power and the funding necessary to make that decision.

Local radio fits perfectly into the new requirement for distinctiveness built into the charter by the Government. No other organisation is providing local radio services anything like those provided by the BBC. Commercial radio stations provide nothing close to the news, current affairs and local journalism that BBC local radio provides. Before I entered the BBC, I worked for commercial radio—30 years ago, believe it or not. [Interruption.] I know—it is hard to believe, but true. I started very young. In those days, commercial radio had something approaching a proper newsroom in each of its local stations, but not any more. Now commercial radio has perhaps a regional newsroom with a very small number of journalists providing news and current affairs across a very wide area. No other organisation is doing what the BBC is doing in local radio. The director-general has said that he wants the BBC’s feet held firmly to the fire on distinctiveness. The place to start is to look at local radio and to acknowledge the distinctive service of local journalism that it provides.

I have two brief points to make in conclusion; I am aware of your strictures on time, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Government have got it absolutely right in making Ofcom the BBC’s external regulator. In my view, having worked for the BBC for all those years, it was always complete nonsense that one body—either the governors or, more recently, the trust—was responsible for both the regulation and the governance of the BBC. That was a classic case of being both poacher and gamekeeper—or both dancer and judge, to use the euphemism du jour—at the same time. The new arrangements are fairer and more transparent.

I end as I began by saying that I love the BBC. It is the best broadcasting organisation in the world, second to none. This Conservative Government also love the BBC. All the nonsense that we heard on certain awards nights and in certain letters to certain papers that this Government sought to in some way hang the BBC out to dry was, to be frank, fiction worthy of one of the drama programmes that the BBC is so good at producing. The BBC is an organisation of which we can be proud. The Government fully support it, as do I, both as a former employee and now as an avid listener and viewer. I commend the licence fee settlement and the charter renewal to the House.

5.11 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) and to put on the record that I have no professional connections whatsoever with the BBC.

The BBC enjoys a position of unique importance in Wales, with Welsh audiences consuming, for want of a better word, a greater proportion of BBC services than those in the other nations and regions of the UK. The “general impression” of the BBC among audiences—that is rather weak terminology, but it is a measure used by the BBC to gauge people’s appreciation of it—is higher in Wales than in any other of the UK’s three nations.

Between 2006 and 2015, BBC Cymru Wales’s spend on English-language TV output was reduced from £24.6 million to £20.8 million—a reduction of about 30% in real terms. In the face of weak media plurality, the BBC has an important role to play in Wales. The situation as it stands is, according to Ofcom, “in stark contrast to Scotland and Northern Ireland”.

The extreme reduction in funding has led to a situation where many stakeholders in Wales are concerned about the lack of a distinctly Welsh portrayal in BBC programming.

To counter the deficit of distinctly Welsh content, the Welsh Affairs Committee’s inquiry into broadcasting in Wales concluded that the BBC should allocate “investment from its current Budget for English language programming in Wales closer to the levels seen in 2006/07.” Green Bay Media’s Dr John Geraint stated that English-language television in Wales has been “eroded to such an extent that it no longer represents the rounded life of the nation”.

The BBC’s current failures to adequately reflect the political divergence in devolution across the United Kingdom have undoubtedly contributed to widespread misinformation about which Government and which Parliament is responsible for what. It is no wonder that fewer than half the Welsh population are aware that it is the Labour Welsh Government who run the Welsh NHS, not the Tories in Westminster, as revealed by a YouGov poll in 2014.

Welsh public life is, naturally, very different from that of the other UK countries, and as a public service broadcaster, the BBC must recognise, respect and reflect those differences in its output. The UK Government’s new BBC charter provided an opportunity for the broadcaster to modernise and to adapt to adequately address the differences in need across the United Kingdom.
I am pleased that the unitary board will include a permanent member from Wales, although it is somewhat worrying that they will be appointed by the Government, potentially introducing political influence to the BBC’s board. I also welcome the BBC’s greater answerability to the National Assembly for Wales, although Plaid Cymru will, of course, continue to call for the devolution of broadcasting.

It is important that the BBC is adequately held to account over its service to Welsh audiences. The Wales representative on the board should refer to a sub-committee in Wales; alternatively, the role of audience councils should be maintained. It is crucial that the broadcaster’s external regulator, Ofcom, has permanent Welsh representation on its board to carry out this role. We warmly welcome the amendment calling for a distinctly Scottish news programme. The English-language equivalent is needed in Wales to allow devolution to flourish and to allow the public to make informed democratic decisions. News about both Wales and the world at large should be seen through a Welsh lens. As a nation, we deserve and need better than to be a five-minute postscript to the world according to England.

Despite the fact that Wales secured 7.8% of UK BBC network television spend in 2014—greater than its 4.9% share of the population—the Assembly’s Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee inquiry noted that, although an increasing number of network productions are being made in Wales, the big commissioning decisions continue to be made in London. The result is that an implicit London-centric bias prevents BBC executives from commissioning network programmes that deal with and distinctively reflect Welsh issues. The Welsh Affairs Committee recommended that the charter make explicit the BBC’s duty to reflect the whole UK in its services by having a non-news genre commissioning editor based in each UK nation.

Chris Evans: The hon. Lady is making an interesting speech. I want to focus on promoting the Welsh language. Does she agree that we have something to learn from our Scandinavian cousins, who have promoted their own language by selling programmes such as “The Killing” and “Wallander”? Does she think that there should be an emphasis on Welsh programmes being exported to the main channels with subtitles?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. I hesitate to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but we in the Chamber have no idea what he has said, because he is addressing the hon. Lady instead of addressing the Chair. I will give him another go at it.

Chris Evans: I am sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker. Please forgive me. Does the hon. Lady agree that we in Wales could learn from our Scandinavian cousins in selling programmes like “Wallander” and “The Killing” to mainstream network channels?

Liz Saville Roberts: I would indeed agree. A Scandinavian-influenced genre noir, “Hinterland”—“Y Gwyll”—has been successfully sold. Another issue that I want to touch on in relation to minority language is the great significance of iPlayer in presenting Welsh-medium and S4C productions to a wider audience. It is essential that minority languages, such as Welsh, have a strong digital presence as we move further into the 21st century.

To return to what I was saying, the Assembly’s Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee felt that the BBC should decentralise its commissioning arrangements, so that more big decisions are made in Wales, and that was reiterated by the Welsh Affairs Committee. Another way to tackle the lack of distinctly Welsh content, as the BBC director-general has proposed, is to create separate service licences for each of the nations. The Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee stated that doing so “would enable BBC Cymru Wales to better prioritise funding to meet its own priorities and obligations.”

That, too, was supported by the Welsh Affairs Committee, which concluded that a national service licence should be introduced for Wales to allow for greater flexibility and accountability for the BBC in Wales.

I welcome the review that is being undertaken by the UK Government into the governance and funding of S4C. The future of S4C’s funding has been under threat in recent years with the reductions in its funding deemed to be “both severe and disproportionate”. It is regrettable that the review will not be published until next year. I would be extremely interested to hear how the UK Government intend to incorporate the recommendations of the S4C review into the renewed charter.

In the absence of media plurality in Wales, the BBC has a duty to inform our citizens. The final BBC charter must reflect the unique needs of Welsh citizens and respect its renewed promise to “reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all of the United Kingdom’s nations”.

5.18 pm

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): I have very much enjoyed listening to today’s debate. I rise to speak in opposition to amendment (a) and in support of the Government’s position.

We have heard hon. Members on both sides of the House talk about the BBC being the premier broadcaster of the world, and indeed it is. I have experienced that myself, having lived in the United States, when the BBC and its news service were my umbilical cord to the United Kingdom. While I was subjected to the unpleasantness of Fox News and other very subjective news broadcasters, the BBC was the only objective broadcaster giving me the news as it was.

The amendment is false because its words seek to give hon. Members the impression that it is about furthering devolution. It is about nothing of the sort; it is about a party hell-bent on destroying the sovereign United Kingdom, using any tool as its means of doing so. Tonight’s tool is amendment (a), which purports to speak for the people of Scotland, but all the SNP wants it to do is to drive a wedge between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom.

The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson) said that Scotland is frustrated. No, SNP Members are frustrated at the position. A YouGov poll earlier this year stated very clearly that 63% of Scots want the BBC’s news output to continue as it is, with a main UK national evening broadcast, followed by a Scottish broadcast such as “Reporting Scotland”.

[...]
John Nicolson: Will the hon. Gentleman explain why the dangerous separatists on his Benches were all in agreement about the idea of a separate Scottish Six? Were they just bamboozled by my eloquence?

Alberto Costa: The Government Members who support the Scottish Six have never fought the SNP. I will be speaking to those hon. Members to explain very clearly its policy, because SNP Members will do anything to bring about the end of the United Kingdom. That is what the amendment is all about. It is just another example of chip-chipping away at a great British institution.

Hon. Members have said that there is great talent in Scotland, and indeed there is: there is great journalistic talent across the United Kingdom. In the BBC, some Scottish journalists make it on to the UK stage. Some great Scottish journalists are able to promote objective news programmes across our kingdom. Let me say very clearly that the Scots want to know exactly what is going on across the United Kingdom. Given that England is the larger partner in the United Kingdom, simply by sheer numbers, it is imperative that Scots are able to see the good work the Conservative Government are doing in other parts of the United Kingdom.

For the avoidance of doubt, let me compare and contrast that, because SNP Members cannot have it both ways. Since their election last year, they have changed their policy and they now talk about torpedoing policies brought in by the UK Government that affect England only or England and Wales only. May I give an example? The SNP education spokeswomen, the hon. Member for Glasgow North West (Carol Monaghan), whom I emailed earlier today, was reported to have said by the Evening Standard just a few days ago: “If schools across England set pay scales lower than the agreed national scales, that would mean an education budget across the piste would be lower, and there are Barnett consequentials for us.” They keep talking about poking their noses into England-only matters because of Barnett consequentials, but, on their own logic, it is imperative that the people of Scotland see exactly what is going on in England so that they can hold their SNP representatives to account.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman seems to be labouring under the apprehension or impression that the Scottish Six will no longer include news from the rest of the UK. I can inform him that that is incorrect. It is a total news programme, so it has local, national and international news within the same programme. His fears can therefore be laid to rest.

Alberto Costa: The arrogance of SNP Members knows no end. They say that there is editorial independence, but now they are telling us exactly what this Scottish Six will contain. It is a farce of tragic proportions. The truth is that the people of England, including my constituents, should know about the SNP’s terrible record. As I said earlier, perhaps we should encourage—not compel—more news to come out of Scotland so that UK citizens, including the constituents of Members on both sides of the House, can hear about the terrible record of the SNP Government. For example, on higher education, fewer disadvantaged students go on to higher education in Scotland than in England. I think my constituents would like to know that.

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): I remind the hon. Gentleman that we have free tuition fees in Scotland, so the constituents he is talking about will be lumbered with tens of thousands of pounds of debt, whereas they would not be in Scotland. We are comfortable with that position.

Alberto Costa: The hon. Gentleman may be comfortable, but the higher education institutes of Scotland are not comfortable, and it is imperative that we hear that across the United Kingdom. Why are there fewer disadvantaged students going on to higher education in Scotland than in England? It is because of the SNP’s appalling track record.

Let us take the NHS too—it is important that the BBC broadcasts this in England. The SNP has NHS targets in Scotland that are constantly not met. The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire talked about BBC Scotland failing to meet targets; I suggest he look at the SNP Government and their failure to meet targets. That is important news that is worthy of being broadcast across the United Kingdom.

The amendment is yet another attempt by separatist MPs—virtually every separatist Member from Scotland has signed it—to chip away at a great British institution. Some of my hon. Friends may, perhaps unwittingly, have fallen foul of the SNP’s propaganda that pretends that the amendment would somehow further devolution, but it would only bring about the hopes and dreams of the separatist party for an end to the United Kingdom. Given that we have a Conservative and Unionist Government, I would hope that all hon. Members want assiduously to defend and protect the Union. While I fully support the Government and their successful agreement with the BBC, I strongly encourage all hon. Members thoroughly to reject the separatist amendment, which does nothing but attempt to destroy the British Broadcasting Corporation.

5.27 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa), if only for the comedy value.

During the somewhat meandering and enervating discussion that passed for a debate on the future of the BBC over the past few months, I became more and more convinced that very few people actually care about the principles involved, and it has become another venue for an argument rather than a consideration of the future of public service broadcasting. At times, the Government and the loyal Opposition seem more interested in striking positions to reflect what they think people are thinking on the Clapham omnibus or in the Biddulph Conservative club.

A funding deal was done behind closed doors and the Opposition hardly blinked at the time. I suppose they thought that it might be their turn to do the deal one day. I am delighted that they have finally found their voice on this issue.

These things should all be out in public, as maybe then we would not have had the stramash about how huge a BBC salary has to be before the BBC makes it public. Maybe then the BBC and the Government could have had the discussions with Equity about the
data protection implications of that decision. It would also have been good to have had a public discussion about whether a public service broadcaster should be privatising, in effect, 60% of its radio output, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman).

The SNP is in favour of high-quality public broadcasting serving the people, and I had hoped that I would find kindred spirits and attitudes on the Benches here. But the BBC, the Government and the loyal Opposition occupy the same space in the heart of the establishment, and their self-referencing conversations are equally self-reinforcing and therefore damaging to the political discourse that should be informed by the BBC’s work.

There is a fond suspension of disbelief in the UK that allows the public to imagine that the BBC is impartial and in service to all of us. It is a comfortable fiction, but it masks a fatal flaw in the set-up of our state broadcaster. I find the BBC’s attitude overpoweringly London-centric, begging towards cooing into the establishment rather than serving the whole of its audience. It reminds me of a fantastic piece by the novelist James Robertson called, “The News Where You Are”. The hon. Member for South Leicestershire might enjoy it. In 365 words, he scores and underscores the perception many of us have in Scotland of the way the BBC views us: the important news is what we tell you it is from our studios in London, and when the important news is all over you can have the news where you are, which is less important, unless we say it is important, in which case we will report it. Mr Robertson does a fantastic reading on YouTube and I urge everyone to listen to it. I am sure the sentiments have echoes elsewhere. There will be similar feelings in Cornwall, Yorkshire, Cumbria and Wales.

The BBC has to modernise not its broadcasting platforms, not the media it uses and not its founding ideals but the attitude to those it is supposed to serve outwith the M25. A little less of the patronising would be good: stop thinking it knows best and start learning to serve. The parallel complaint can be levelled against BBC Scotland: stop kowtowing to London as if Broadcasting House holds the great sages of the modern era. Get up and make decent programmes, including a properly resourced Scottish Six, and shout out loud if you are being underfunded.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): I am somewhat troubled by the hon. Lady’s position. On the one hand, she says that the BBC thinks it knows best. On the other hand, she is making the point that Scottish National party Members know best. Surely the BBC is in a better place to decide objectively on where to focus, rather than individual Members in this place who, when it comes down to it, are all very parochial?

Deidre Brock: I suggest that we are all here as critical friends of the BBC and I make those comments in that spirit.

BBC Scotland should shout out loud if it is being underfunded. We know that the entire budget for all of BBC Scotland radio and television is outstripped by the budget for Radio 4 alone. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson) mentioned, BBC Scotland gaining control of the money raised in Scotland from the licence fee could see an additional £100 million a year invested in the creative sector, supporting 1,500 full-time equivalent jobs and boosting the economy. The more important aspect is that Scottish programming should be Scottish, not only reflecting Scotland but reporting the world through a Scottish vision.

Alberto Costa: In my speech, I mentioned a YouGov poll in which 63% of Scots said they were happy with the news output as is. Why is the hon. Lady not listening to the people of Scotland?

Deidre Brock: I think that that was based on the suggestion of a pilot along the lines of the current “Reporting Scotland” news programme, and audiences have not yet seen the pilots going on at the moment.

Nigel Huddleston: I have some sympathy with the hon. Lady’s argument about the BBC being extraordinarily London-centric. In the Midlands, probably one of the worst-served areas, the BBC licence fee spend is £12.40 per head versus £757 in London.

Deidre Brock: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that information. I was not aware of that, but the Midlands should make its views known to London. I look forward to his contribution later on in the debate. I am sure that that will be mentioned.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire mentioned MG Alba. Under the previous Chancellor, MG Alba had its central funding cut. Obviously, saying that £1 million was what was needed to turn the deficit around, rather than the billions spent on Trident. It is time that MG Alba was placed on the same footing and the same funding as S4C. Give the Gaels their Government funding and a fair share of the licence fees, too. In short, it is time to hand over the cash. So raise up your voices, BBC Scotland, and shout out any inequality, injustice or bad deal. The Scottish Six has to be an outstanding success, free of London control and the dead hand of Broadcasting House. The BBC has to do that, and do it well, to start restoring its credibility in Scotland. This will be only the beginning.

It is good to see that there has been some movement towards including the devolved Administrations in decisions about the future of the BBC, but it has to go further, and more of the BBC has to be devolved so that the good programmes that are being made can be built upon. Scottish programming has to reflect Scotland back to itself—not just have programmes made in Scotland that could just as easily be made anywhere else. No more “Waterloo Road” fare! Scottish programme makers have shown themselves time and again capable of making high-quality content. They do not need London rejects to bulk it up.

More than implementing governance changes, BBC Scotland has to clear out the dead wood from its own backyard: away with the tired and safe presenting styles on radio and television; away with the centralised styles of the BBC’s news reporting; and away with those executives who have outlived their imaginitive years. BBC Scotland should have editorial and financial independence, and exercise it ruthlessly. No more lift and shift, and no more forelock tugging: shed the
self-effacement and timidity, and start to create a broadcasting corporation that does not engage the people just in phone-ins or vox pops, but engages them in interest, intellect and thought. It should raise those ideals as concepts to which people can cleave.

This charter renewal means nothing more than previous renewals, and future renewals will mean nothing more than this one so long as there is little imagination and no new thought in the continuous plod of the BBC. It seems that we have come to this point with no forethought from Government or broadcaster about what it is they actually want the BBC to do. The cut in Foreign Office grant affected the World Service in the early days of the first Cameron Government, cutting into that soft diplomacy mission—the famous nation speaking peace unto nation. As the licence fees costs for people over 75 fall on to the BBC’s shoulders, we will see more pressure to cut, cut again.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend share my concern at the tendency of the Foreign Office to start classifying some of the money it spends on the World Service as “overseas development assistance”, which is diverting the money from what it should be spent on—poverty reduction?

Deidre Brock: I absolutely do, and I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution about an alarming development.

In the midst of this austerity-inspired orgy of cuts, no one appears to be saying that there is a plan for the BBC that does not involve using it as a political football—and, unfortunately, no one at the BBC is speaking up.

Alberto Costa: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Deidre Brock: Talking of political footballs.

The charter can be renewed as often as is convenient; the management structures of the BBC can be tinkered into powerlessness; the output can be eternally criticised, praised, held up as world-leading, condemned as not fit for purpose, mocked, exalted or switched off. Nothing is beyond the imagination of politicians looking for something to say. Until there is a serious engagement about what the corporation should be doing, however, it will continue to drift on a current whose direction was set nearly a century ago in a broadcasting landscape bearing no resemblance to today’s landscape.

Alberto Costa: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) is a very excitable denizen of the House, and he is a very keen and assiduous parliamentarian, but he does not enrich his case for intervention by repeating it. He should not seek to harangue people. A polite inquiry—with his insistent air, of course—is legitimate.

Deidre Brock: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I had just one sentence to complete my speech.

It has been buffeted by winds and blown about a bit over those 100 years, but whose hand is on the tiller, and who guides or seeks to guide the BBC’s long-term direction?

5.39 pm

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I am not sure that I can compete with that exciting exchange, but it is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock).

I start by congratulating the dozens of bodies and institutions, and the 190,000-plus members of the British public, who participated in the consultation that has led to a very successful outcome in the form of the draft charter. The scale of that involvement clearly shows how close the BBC is to the hearts of many people in the United Kingdom. Let me also give credit where it is due—to the former Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), for all the work and effort that he and his team put into drafting the charter; and to the current team for pursuing the process and ensuring that it reached this very successful point.

It is true that the BBC itself supports the vast majority of the charter and is now quibbling over relatively small points, including about the revelation of on-screen talent pay, which I shall come to in a moment. The most important change, in my view, involves governance and independence. The BBC Trust was clearly not fit for purpose, and the new unitary board will be a far more effective oversight body, alongside Ofcom. For the first time in its history, the BBC will itself appoint the majority of members to its board, and the Government will therefore not be able to outvote the BBC. That is a fundamental point.

The Culture, Media and Sport Committee, of which I have the honour of being a member, will have a role in the appointment of the chair of the unitary board, and there will, of course, be consultation with the Governments of the nations on the other public appointments. There will be a thorough public appointments process; the idea that there will be Government stooges in those roles is completely false and fabricated, and simply does not stack up with the facts.

Ofcom will play a significantly enhanced role. I am a member of the Public Bill Committee that is considering the Digital Economy Bill, and I was pleased when a representative of Ofcom came along last week and reassured us that it had the necessary skills and experience to take on that additional role. Where Ofcom needs to hire, it is currently in the process of hiring, so I am confident that it will be able to fulfil its role with great skill. I also applaud the expanded role of the National Audit Office. Notwithstanding comments to the contrary, the NAO has skills and experience in the handling of commercial elements of contracts, and it is more than capable of auditing the operations of BBC Worldwide.

The issue of talent salaries has received a fair amount of attention, but I do not think that many of my constituents are losing sleep over it. It is proposed that the BBC should reveal talent salaries of more than £150,000 a year, which is roughly what the Prime Minister is paid. That threshold for revealing salaries is standard practice in the rest of the public sector; and, indeed, in the BBC itself. BBC management salaries of more than £150,000 are already revealed, and, of course, management is also talent, although it is not on-air talent. It seems logical to extend the process to on-air talent. The argument that the BBC would be damaged if salaries were revealed
does not hold water; if that were the case, it would already be vigorously losing talent on the management side.

As the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson) has observed on many occasions, this is a rather gossipy industry. Most people in the industry—the agents and so on—already know who is paid what. About the only people who do not know what the “top talent” are paid are those who are doing the paying: us, the licence fee payers. It is about time that we corrected that. If the talent really are worth as much as they are being paid, they should have nothing to hide from or fear.

We need only look at what our top pop stars, film stars and sporting stars are being paid to realise that the British public are quite tolerant of what many would consider to be exorbitant salaries, as long as the people concerned give pleasure to millions and are talented, and are therefore perceived as being worth it. The BBC need not worry about revealing talent salaries if they are seen to be in keeping with market rates. Indeed, Claudia Winkleman has already declared that she considers herself to be working for the public and does not mind that her salary will be revealed. I hope that, when salaries are revealed by the BBC, a gender pay gap is not revealed at the same time. I hope that the very revelation of salaries may deal with existing pay scales that are rather unnecessary and abhorrent.

Let me end by mentioning the Scottish Six—to the upset, I fear, of my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa). As a member of the Select Committee, and following multiple conversations, I am sympathetic to the arguments in favour of a Scottish Six. If I were watching the news in England and the top three items were a Scottish health story, a Scottish education story and a Scottish legal system story, I might be a bit bored and turn it off. It is not that I am uninterested in such matters; it is just that I would not want them to be the top news items. However, although I do indeed have great sympathy with the arguments for a Scottish Six, I disagree with my friends on the SNP Benches, because they are asking the Government to interfere. This is a dangerous area. There are areas in which the BBC does itself have to make editorial and operational decisions, and this is one of them. It is up to us to make sure that we put pressure on the BBC, make the arguments and monitor its behaviour on this—and, indeed, on other areas of spend, such as the regions and the midlands versus London. I do not, however, believe it is right for Parliament to get into such detail and force these decisions, although I am keen to continue to monitor the situation and argue the case for a Scottish Six along with my friends on the SNP Benches.

5.45 pm

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): This has been an interesting debate. We have heard a wide range of speeches praising the BBC, and I also come here to add my pennyworth of praise: I think that the BBC is an excellent institution. I have been in the privileged position of presenting a programme on the BBC, and I have rarely met a bunch of more professional, accommodating and friendly people than those who worked on the programme I had the honour of presenting.

I repeat a point that my right hon. Friend for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), the former Secretary of State, made about the future of the BBC and technology. It is obvious to most people in this country that we will live through a vast range of changes. There will be a vast acceleration in the ability of technology to provide programmes and changes to how people access programmes. The only thing I would say about the charter in relation to this is that it covers quite a long period. Other Members have claimed that a health check after five and a half years will be deleterious to the functioning of the BBC—that it is just some sort of plot to try to change the nature of the BBC. However, if the charter lasts for 11 years, surely it makes sense to have some form of break clause or health check after five and a half years, because none of us have any idea of where we will be in terms of technology and how we access material on screen in five and a half years’ time.

My right hon. Friend said the licence fee would be looked at. I think the licence fee is little more than a poll tax. It is fairly controversial in this day and age—this is a matter for legitimate debate—to expect David Beckham to pay exactly the same as someone in much more limited circumstances just for the privilege of accessing the BBC. It is interesting that the charter will extend the licence fee, but at the end of this period, it might well be looked at and reformed. In some instances, subscription services clearly represent a more attractive approach.

We recently debated diversity on the Floor of the House and the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) has spoken eloquently about it. Pious words are very easy and cheap. Progress has been made, but it is difficult to measure it. Other speakers have said they think the BBC’s feet should be held to the fire on diversity. I am not just talking about ethnic or gender diversity, because we must look at regional diversity, as has been mentioned, and the balance in representation on screen between able-bodied and disabled people. There is a long way to go on this, and the BBC itself is perhaps not the best judge of how it is performing. The right hon. Gentleman said there had been about 30 diversity initiatives in the last 17 years, yet nobody says that there has been any inquiry into what has actually been achieved; there is just a general notion that the BBC has improved.

I do not dispute the fact that improvements have been made, but there does not seem to be any way of measuring them, so that is something that Ministers, the BBC and others should consider.

I also want to touch briefly on the question of value for money. The BBC has £3.7 billion a year. That is a lot of money—it is a big organisation—and it is perfectly legitimate for Members on both sides of the House to look at its expenditure and rigorously question whether the public are getting value for money. When I hear Scottish National party Members complaining about an “orgy of cuts”, I tend to get slightly irritated. The BBC has not suffered an “orgy of cuts”. In fact, when we look at Government spending over the past six years, I and others see the BBC as something of a pampered child. It has been exempt from some of the difficult choices that we have made.

Alberto Costa: Does my hon. Friend agree that the language being used is just another example of the separatists trying to drive a wedge between the Scots and the English—or, in this case, the London media?
**Kwasi Kwarteng**: I appreciate my hon. Friend’s concern about separatist language, although I do not really see it in those terms. I have heard this Father Christmas approach to public spending many times. I have always argued against it; it is not a mature approach to the difficult choices that we have to make. Complaining about an “orgy of cuts” is not a helpful or accurate way of talking about the Government’s approach to the BBC. It is perfectly legitimate for Members of Parliament to look rigorously at public expenditure and at an organisation that enjoys lavish expenditure and receives large sums from the taxpayer. It is legitimate for us to examine that expenditure and to expect a degree of savings.

In my six years in the House, I have always argued against a Father Christmas approach that involves constant public spending and protesting about orgies of cuts or austerity, which, in this instance, is not even happening at the BBC. Indeed, given where we were during the previous Parliament, I think the Government have been rather generous in their treatment of the BBC, as well they might be. It is a cherished and well-respected national organisation, and there is nothing in the charter to suggest that the Government’s approach will be any more generous or challenging towards the BBC’s expenditure than was the case in the previous Parliament.

The BBC is well protected, and the charter is to be commended for some of the reforms that it introduces, including new roles for the National Audit Office and Ofcom. These represent improvements in the governance of the BBC. In the round, the charter has most things right, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) said. It has the potential to be successful, and I am very happy to lend it and the Government’s approach to the BBC my support.

5.53 pm  
**Huw Merriman** (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is an absolute pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng). He is rarely off the TV, and he is a fine contributor to the BBC. Whenever I turn on the TV, he seems to be there making his contribution. I hope that, notwithstanding some of the criticism, his chair on “Newsnight” will not be replaced by the one that Graham Norton uses when he ejects an unfortunate audience member.

I should like to declare an interest, in that I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the BBC. I am very proud to hold that position. I welcome the new BBC charter and the compromises made by the Government and the BBC to ensure its delivery. I particularly welcome the charter’s 11-year duration, which should, provided that fixed Parliaments survive, take the next renewal out of the election cycle. I have long found it unfortunate that the BBC gets accused of bias from all sides during elections or referendums. While pressure coming from both sides must demonstrate that the BBC is balanced, calmer mid-term waters will be a better starting point for the next charter renewal. I find politicians’ accusations of bias tiresome and that is followed in my list of moans by demands that the BBC find its own voice, with the proviso that the lyrics and music are written by interested Members of this House—I ask the SNP to take note.

I am pleased that the licence fee is guaranteed for the next 11 years, rising in line with inflation each year, that the Government have legislated to close the iPlayer loophole and that they will phase out the ring-fencing of £150 million a year for broadband roll-out.

The BBC took a big hit when it was determined that it should be responsible for free TV licences for the over-75s. The BBC is much loved and cherished by the nation, but its reputation is only as good as the output that it can deliver. The licence fee and the BBC’s commercial enterprises provide the BBC with 25% of the UK’s TV revenues, but it accounts for 45% of investment into original British programmes. I hope that the Government’s additional funding commitments will help the BBC to deliver more excellence to its viewers and listeners.

I have three particular issues on which I hope the Government will focus their efforts following publication of the charter. The first relates to listed sporting events. By closing the iPlayer loophole, which previously allowed viewers to watch content without having to buy a TV licence, the Government have demonstrated that existing legislation has to change in order to capture the original intention in a fast-moving digital age. I ask the Government to consider making the same change to preserve the status of listed sporting events.

The BBC currently interprets a listed sporting event as one that is available only to a broadcaster that will air free of charge and that can be delivered via TV to 95% of the population. With more consumers opting to watch programmes on tablets and other devices, soon no terrestrial broadcaster will be able to reach that figure. I believe that the intention is merely that the output should be free and that the nation can access it. As I understand it, the Government have no plans to change the sporting listed status regime, but I have invited the Secretary of State to meet me to discuss how the legislation can be updated to account for the technology of our age. I was incredibly grateful to have shared a few words with the Secretary of State this afternoon and it appears that her view is that the rules do not restrict the BBC in the way that it thinks they do. Equally, the Department’s view is that if it turns out that the drafting does restrict the BBC, it is open to considering a change. I am grateful to the ministerial team for being so open—I am sure the BBC will think the same.

My second point relates to the National Audit Office. Paragraph 55 of the draft agreement provides that the Comptroller and Auditor General can scrutinise the BBC. I welcome that, but there are two minor areas that may need further consideration. The first relates to which aspects of the BBC can be examined by the NAO. Paragraph 55(1) states that the BBC is to be examined. However, paragraph 55(2) specifies that the BBC’s subsidiaries must also engage with the NAO to that end. I assume that means that the NAO will be examining the BBC’s commercial activities. The NAO is supposed to scrutinise whether bodies have used public money efficiently, but the BBC’s commercial subsidiaries do not, and legally cannot under the charter, use licence fee revenue. It therefore seems unusual to extend the original British programmes. I hope that the Government’s output should be free and that the nation can access it. As I understand it, the Government have no plans to change the sporting listed status regime, but I have invited the Secretary of State to meet me to discuss how the legislation can be updated to account for the technology of our age. I was incredibly grateful to have shared a few words with the Secretary of State this afternoon and it appears that her view is that the rules do not restrict the BBC in the way that it thinks they do. Equally, the Department’s view is that if it turns out that the drafting does restrict the BBC, it is open to considering a change. I am grateful to the ministerial team for being so open—I am sure the BBC will think the same.

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“consult” the BBC when making this determination, I agree with the hon. Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson) that there is no dispute mechanism in place should the BBC wish to contest the NAO’s determination. Again, I ask the Government to seek to rectify that should disagreements occur between the two bodies.

The third area on which I hope the Government will focus relates to distinctive output, which is now written into the charter, with the requirement for Ofcom to hold the BBC to account for its delivery on distinctiveness. My concern is that there appears to be the utilisation of quotas from the outset. Lord Grade has said that “quotas and prescription are the enemies of innovation and distinctiveness. The BBC must be...free to experiment and to take the risks and meet the challenges that free-to-air private sector broadcasters cannot afford to.”—[Official Report, House of Lords, 12 October 2016; Vol. 774, c. 1986.]

May I ask that Ofcom be given the discretion to determine whether quotas are the best way for the BBC to deliver distinctive output? A broadcaster that bravely decides to put ballroom dancing and baking competitions on prime-time TV is doing pretty well in this space already, so I do not believe the Government have or should have concerns as to the distinctiveness of the BBC.

During the debate about this charter renewal, those supporting the BBC wanted to ensure that the licence fee would be preserved and would rise by inflation; that the next licence fee renewal would be taken out of the electoral cycle; and that the Government appointments to the new board would not outweigh the BBC appointments. The Government have listened to these concerns, in addition to many others, and have given the BBC even more independence and support than existed previously. I am grateful to the Government for continuing to support this amazing and unique institution, which is the envy of the world. It is true that if we were inventing the BBC for the first time in 2016, it would not be organised or funded as it now is. At a cost of only 40p per day, thank goodness we have it, and long may it remain.

6.2 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): It is a great privilege to close the debate this afternoon. As most hon. Members have acknowledged, the BBC is a great British achievement. It is truly a national treasure: a hugely precious communal possession. We all own the BBC, so it is natural that so many of us have such strong views about changing it. As an organisation with such reach and power, it is entirely right that the BBC’s new royal charter is the cause of intense debate, so I welcome the interesting and important points made here today from all parts of the House.

It has been particularly heartening to see such agreement across the House on the need for the BBC to improve its diversity commitments. The former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale), the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), a former Minister, the SNP Front Benchers, the hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) all spoke passionately about the need for the BBC to do better. The hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald made the important point that there is no Ofcom information sheet on diversity and equal opportunities, and that full transparency is necessary to drive diversity. She looks forward, as we do, to tougher action from the new Ofcom chief executive, Sharon White, and a stronger challenge to the BBC, particularly on the publication of data.

The hon. Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins)—I would not want to be accused of partiality in the reporting of what was said by the two Members who are in competition to be Chair of the Select Committee—equally championed transparency as being vital to the charter. He rightly praised the BBC for taking risks that no other broadcaster would. However, as was said by my right hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham, who is not yet back in his place, the BBC has never published an evaluation of its diversity policy, despite more than 30 initiatives. He is an assiduous campaigner and he will not let the Front Benchers on either side of the House take their foot off the pedal on diversity progress in the BBC.

Criticism has come from several Members who have substantial experience in this policy area, no one less than the former Minister, the right hon. Member for Wantage. We are sorry that he has been taken off the Front Bench, but pleased that he has been liberated on the Back Benches, and completely support his comments that the contestable fund is too small and risks creating additional bureaucracy. That money should go back to the BBC with a condition that it is spent on specific diverse content, such as children’s broadcasting.

The former shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Marina Eagle), gave a passionate defence of the BBC. We are incredibly grateful to her for her tireless work on scrutinising the Government’s reforms to the BBC charter. She sought reassurance from the Government on three key areas: the specific definition of distinctiveness from Ofcom; what additional resource will be provided to Ofcom in its new role; and what changes the mini charter review will be empowered to make.

Similarly, my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), another former shadow Minister, raised concerns about the potential for interference in editorial content and decision making and about opening up the BBC to anti-competition challenges. We look forward to hearing the Minister’s comments on those matters.

I particularly enjoyed the speech from the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) and what amounted to little more than SNP baiting across the Chamber. I would not like to get in between the two—I certainly would not fancy my chances. The hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) made the important but quite fundamental point about the BBC being our greatest and proudest export. The hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) gave an excellent speech, which was appreciated by Members on both sides of the House. He made the important point that the Select Committee will have a role in overseeing the appointment of the chair of the new board, which is a welcome improvement on the appointment of the chair of the trust, which provoked criticism all round.

The hon. Member for Spelthorne (Kwasi Quartey) made the case for us to hold the BBC’s feet to the fire on diversity, and not simply rely on a vague impression
that we have improved. Last but not least, the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman) listed sporting events and the 95% threshold. I can assure him that we will consider that matter in the Digital Economy Bill Committee when it reaches scrutiny of part 4 next week. I hope that the Minister has been listening and that he will seek to amend that piece of legislation himself. If he does not, we have an amendment that is ready to go in the line by line scrutiny next week.

I welcome the opportunity to add my own contribution to that of my hon. Friends. The charter renewal process is a chance to strengthen and adapt the BBC’s position as it heads into each new decade, so that it remains a crucial part of our national conversation. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich East (Mr Watson) has said, we on these Benches broadly approve of this new version. Of course we have our concerns about the role of the NAO and the distinctiveness requirement and the interpretation of that by Ofcom. On the whole, this charter is a welcome confirmation of the BBC’s scope and the principle of universality. It is a confirmation that the BBC should continue doing what it does so well, which is providing something for everyone from “Gardeners World” to “Doctor Who”, “The One Show” to “The Life Scientific” and “Woman’s Hour” to “Charlie and Lola”. It is a welcome removal of the BBC from the political cycle, which can only help safeguard its independence—the independence that we know that the public value so highly. It is also a welcome redoubling of the BBC’s diversity obligations.

The BBC must go into its second century with a much better representation—on screen and off—of race, sex, age and ability. It is only right that all licence fee payers should see themselves in the programmes for which they are paying, so the BBC’s commitment to diversity must get even broader. It must learn to seek out talent across all the social classes. There is a stereotype of the sort of person who makes the telly: the white posh kid with a good education and the right contacts. The BBC needs to blast that stereotype apart and make it as old-fashioned a concept as continuity announcers wearing dinner jackets. It should be seen as a funny piece of outdated nonsense that has nothing to do with the modern BBC. I look forward to seeing that happen and working constructively with the Government on how we monitor and enforce genuine diversity in all its forms across the BBC.

I also join hon Members in applauding the emphasis placed in the charter on accurately reporting and portraying the lives of all people in all the regions of the UK. Let me make the point again that we all pay for the BBC, so it is only right that the BBC should repay that investment by commissioning and making programmes in and for all the nations of this country.

In truth, there is much to approve of in this new charter. The positives almost make up for the underhand, aggressive, bully-boy way this Government negotiated the last licence-fee settlement. The BBC should not have been given the responsibility for funding a Tory party manifesto pledge and nor should it have been given responsibility for delivering the Government’s social policy on free TV licences for the over-75s. It should have felt able to reject even the suggestion that it take on the cost of those free TV licences. That it did not—that it ended up in essence agreeing to become an arm of the Department for Work and Pensions—says a lot about the cavalier, overbearing, menacing way that this Government treated an organisation that they should cherish. It is the equivalent of outsourcing children’s services to Virgin Care and asking Richard Branson to administer child benefit and who should get it. Virgin would not accept such a proposal, seeing it as a threat to its reputation, and the BBC should not have to do so either.

The Labour party will not support Government cowardice in outsourcing welfare policy to an unaccountable organisation. If the Conservatives wanted to cut TV licence fees for over-75s, they should have had the guts to put that in their manifesto and they should have campaigned on it, but they did not. So although we support the charter, we will return to the matter in the Committee stage of the Digital Economy Bill. Despite public outcry, this Government have still not ruled out further such stick-ups. They have refused to establish a transparent process to set the licence fees of the future. Without such a reassurance, we do not consider the matter a done deal.

We shall consider the issue again as the Digital Economy Bill goes through Committee because we on the Labour Benches are committed to the cause of a strong, independent, well funded national broadcaster. It is nothing less than the British public deserve and we shall not let this Government hollow out, purely for petty political gain, an institution that the British people prize so highly.

6.11 pm

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock): It is a pleasure to respond on behalf of the Government to this long and high-quality debate on the BBC’s future. The debate is a fitting conclusion to the process of charter review, during which we have had some hotly contested debates and some discussions that have brought cross-party approval. We have debated some of the crucial issues surrounding what everybody agrees is one of the most loved public institutions in this country. It is good to be able to think about so many of those issues today—almost all the key issues that have been debated over the past year have once again been discussed in this debate. That reflects well on the BBC and the House.

We have reached a positive outcome. That seems to be the overwhelming sentiment in the debates in this House, in the other place and in the three devolved Assemblies, which, over the past few weeks, have all debated the settlement, the charter and the agreement. Crucially, the BBC broadly agrees with the approach that we are taking, and I am hugely heartened because this broad consensus of support for the way in which the BBC will go forward over the next 11 years is an asset to the nation. It shows that we have done the right thing for the BBC, for the UK’s unique creative sector and for the audiences whom we serve all around the United Kingdom.

I pay tribute to those who have done most of the work. I am proud to have played a small part, but the real heavy lifting was done by my right hon. Friends the Members for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) and for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), who are both in their places, rightly blushing, as they should have done all the way through the debate. It was very entertaining to see their private disagreements being aired in public. The fact that we have such capable, wise and thoughtful former Ministers contributing from
the Back Benches is a great asset. My hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) said that everyone loves the BBC, and I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) will put him right shortly.

I thank all Members who contributed and fed into the charter review and all the 192,000 members of the public and organisations who have been involved. I shall go through as many of the detailed issues as I can. On diversity, we drew on a strong well of cross-party support across the House from all the parties whose Members spoke. It is critical that the BBC should reflect the nation that it serves. It has acknowledged that it needs to do more, but more it must do. I am sure that it will, but we will undoubtedly hold its feet to the fire, and Ofcom will ensure that the commitments in the charter are upheld. Of course, it is for the BBC board, in the first instance, to set, monitor and fulfil its policies, but Ofcom will assess that performance periodically. Sharon White, the chief executive of Ofcom, has already remarked upon the BBC’s diversity record and said that it needs to do better, so clearly progress needs to be made.

The hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham), my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant) and the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) all made powerful speeches on the importance of diversity. In answer to a specific point, an information sheet on diversity policy will be produced pronto. On screen and off screen matters; it matters not only who is reflecting the country on our TV screens, but who is making the decisions and who is working at all levels of the organisation. I think that is true across most organisations. The case was put most strongly when the point was made that this is not only a social but an economic imperative, because we need to draw on all the talents of our nation.

Several Members talked about the importance of radio, including the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas), my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage, the hon. Member for Islwyn (Chris Evans) and my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones). Support for the BBC delivering diverse radio content is incredibly important, and I am sure that the BBC has heard the message loud and clear.

I want to address the point about distinctiveness. Including distinctiveness in the BBC charter was an important part of the renewal process. My right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon spoke about that eloquently. In fact, I would go so far as to say that the Government see distinctiveness in exactly the way he set out. In answer to a question that was asked, the draft agreement makes it clear that BBC services and output need to be taken as a whole when it comes to distinctiveness. Ofcom has the experience and guidance to treat complaints relating to distinctiveness properly and appropriately. It will set broad metrics, but this must not become a tick-box exercise. It needs to take into account all BBC output. Again, those will be high-level requirements. Ofcom can then develop an evidence-based approach to think about the BBC’s distinctiveness.

Let me turn to appointments and governance, which was a point of contention for some Members. My hon. Friend the Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst) spoke powerfully about the need to ensure that we have strong governance to support an excellent BBC. There was strong support for the unitary board and for external regulation by Ofcom. We have been working closely with the BBC to set out the processes by which the new board will be established. Some Members suggested that the processes undermined the BBC’s independence. They could not be more wrong. The new processes for appointment to the BBC board are unprecedented, in terms of the number of appointments that will fall to the BBC itself. Of course, Government appointments, following the proper OCPA—Office of Commissioner for Public Appointments—processes, are often for independent positions. Once appointed, all appointees will be independent board members of the BBC, responsible for the BBC in its entirety. The board, as was clearly pointed out, will not have editorial control; it will be non-executive. I thought that my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) made the argument very well when he explained this quite passionately and set out Ofcom’s oversight role.

Let me turn to the over-75s deal, which I am told we will return to in the Digital Economy Bill. The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and Opposition Front Benchers set out concerns about this. The agreement on the concession for free TV licences is important. The licence fee is classed as a tax, and as such the Government retain ultimate control over it. That is the system we have successfully relied upon for decades. The track record is unbroken by last summer’s deal. Far from using some of the terms that were used in the debate, I will leave the House with this comment by the BBC’s director-general:

“The government’s decision to put the cost of the over-75s on us has been more than matched by the deal coming back for the BBC.”

That is the reality of the settlement that was agreed, and it is why it is reasonable for everybody to support it. The deal was reached in negotiation with the BBC, and there were concessions in return—for instance, closing the iPlayer loophole and making sure that all those who watch BBC content will pay for the BBC in the future. The closure of the iPlayer loophole is one of the important long-term considerations that will support the BBC sustainably into the very distant future.

As part of the deal, we said that we will transfer the policy of the over-75s concessions to the BBC in the Digital Economy Bill, and some people were concerned about that, but the BBC itself requested that change. The BBC has a long history of dealing delicately with matters on the licence fee, which, while it remains the most supported method of funding the BBC, is not universally popular, but I am sure the BBC will be able to handle that appropriately.

We had a series of discussions about the contestable fund. In fact, this was one of the moments of extraordinary distance between my right hon. Friends the Members for Maldon and for Wantage. There they are sitting next to each other right now, but the gap was apparent in their speeches earlier. The licence fee is a fee paid by the general public to watch or record TV programmes; it is not necessarily just a payment for BBC services. That was true in the last Parliament and the last settlement, when we used some of that money for broadband, which was very exciting. It is reasonable that a small proportion of the licence fee can be made available to organisations other than the BBC to help deliver publicly funded content.
Michael Gove (Surrey Heath) (Con)]: My right hon. Friend understandably draws attention to the apparently contested views on the contestable fund of my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Mr Whittingdale) and for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), but the truth is that those views—like BBC1 and BBC2, or like Radio 6 Music and Radio 1—are in fact complementary. Yes, there is a slight difference between them, but they reinforce the overall thrust and wisdom of the reforms that, together, my right hon. Friend introduced and that, I think, are applauded across the House.

Matt Hancock: I would love to say I agree with my right hon. Friend, but he obviously missed those exchanges, because there really was quite a lot of distance between my two right hon. Friends. In fact, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage repudiated the position he had supported when he was bound by collective responsibility. However, the troika of my right hon. Friends will no doubt be able to discuss the issue at length as we debate what the contestable fund should be used on. Given that this is a pilot, we are going to look at, and work on, how the contestable fund should operate. At the end of the pilot, we will then assess the impact of the scheme. Questions were raised over the permanence of the funding. There is £60 million of funding over two to three years. Then we can assess the effectiveness of having a contestable fund.

Many right hon. and hon. Members discussed the mid-term review. Most were supportive, and it is entirely reasonable that we look at how Ofcom discharges its duties, for instance. It will not look at the mission of the BBC, the public purposes of the BBC or the licence fee funding model over the period of the charter. However, there were a couple of dissident voices. The hon. Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle) was grateful that the process was taken out of the political cycle, and she supported separate processes for funding and review in future, but she was concerned about mission creep in the mid-term review. I want to assure her that this is not envisaged as another charter review, but it is right that we can have a look at how things are working halfway through the next 11 years.

Several Members discussed the importance of the National Audit Office. I can confirm that it will assess the value for money, and it will cover publicly funded areas and subsidiaries. The same rules that the Comptroller and Auditor General uses for what is in scope will apply through the next 11 years. I want to assure her that this is not envisaged as another charter review, but it is right that we can have a look at how things are working halfway through the next 11 years.

On listed events, I understand the concern raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman). We have looked in detail at this, and we disagree on the matter. We do not think that the BBC’s concerns are valid, but we will of course keep it under review.

There was a big discussion about salary transparency. I strongly believe in transparency of salaries for publicly funded posts. As the Secretary of State set out, BBC studios are commercial—as they must be under the charter—and it is therefore reasonable for them not to be covered, but the BBC itself is public. This is public money, so transparency is reasonable, as in other parts of the public sector.

I turn to the SNP amendment and the devolved legislatures. Broadcasting is a reserved matter, because broadcasting is a national issue, and the BBC is the nation’s broadcaster. Of course, the BBC needs better to reflect the diversity of the whole UK, and we have worked hard to ensure that that is in the charter and the agreement. I remind the House that the new charter includes the implementation of recommendations from the Smith commission, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) outlined so powerfully, did not recommend that broadcasting or the affairs of the BBC be devolved. On the specific issue of the Scottish six o’clock news, which has drawn so much speculation, it is vital that the BBC is editorially independent, so that politicians cannot interfere with editorial matters. A vote for the amendment is a vote for political control of the BBC. The SNP may want political control of the BBC, but we say no. What is more, as the charter says, the BBC, as the nation’s broadcaster, “should bring people together for shared experiences and help contribute to the social cohesion and wellbeing of the United Kingdom”.

I hope that the House will resist the amendment, support the charter and all the work that has gone into it over the past year, and, with that, wish the BBC a strong, vital and healthy future.

Amendment proposed: (a), at end insert—

“and, recognising the special identities of the nations of the UK, calls upon the Government and the British Broadcasting Corporation to deliver maximum devolution of broadcasting and, specifically for Scotland, the six o’clock news option recommended by the Culture, Media and Sport Committee in its Third Report, BBC White Paper and related issues (HC 150), published in August 2016”.

(John Nicolson.)

Question put. That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 53, Noes 270.

Division No. 68] [6.27 pm

AYES

Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
Akrass, Richard
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Boswell, Philip
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Chapman, Douglas
Cherry, Joanna
Cowan, Ronnie
Crawley, Angela
Day, Martyn
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Durkan, Mark
Edwards, Jonathan
Ferrier, Margaret
Gibson, Patricia
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Hendry, Drew
Hoey, Kate
Hosie, Stewart
Kerevan, George
Kerr, Calum
Law, Chris

MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan
McCrae, Callum
McDonald, Stuart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McLaughlin, Anne
Monaghan, Dr Paul
Mullin, Roger
Newlands, Gavin
Nicolson, John
O’Hara, Brendan
Oswald, Kirsten
Paterson, Steven
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Salmond, Rh Alex
Saville Roberts, Liz
Shedd, Tommy
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Stephens, Chris
Thewliss, Alison
Weir, Mike
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Wilson, Corri

Tellers for the Ayes: Marion Fellows and Owen Thompson

NOES

Adams, Nigel
Afridi, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy

Allan, Lucy
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy

That this House approves the draft Agreement (Cm 9332),
Question accordingly negatived.
Tellers for the Noes:
Wragg, William
Wood, Mike
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wilson, Mr Rob
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wiggin, Bill
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wilson, Sammy
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William

Tellers for the Noes:
Steve Brine and Andrew Griffiths

Question accordingly negatived.
Main Question put and agreed to. Resolved,
That this House approves the draft Agreement (Cm 9332), between the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport and the British Broadcasting Corporation, which was laid before this House on 15 September 2016.
6.41 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): I am grateful for the opportunity to present this petition, calling for fair transitional arrangements for women born in the 1950s who are affected by the changes to the state pension age. Hon. Members will remember that the last time the House debated the Pensions Act 2011, Ministers promised that there would be fair transitional arrangements. These have failed to materialise, harshly affecting women in Edinburgh East and, indeed, in many other areas. I thank all those who have contributed to the petition, and the many others throughout the country who have similarly contributed to petitions lodged by other hon. Members.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Edinburgh East.

Declares that as a result of the way in which the 1995 Pension Act and the 2011 Pension Act were implemented, women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age; further that hundreds of thousands of women have had significant changes imposed on them with little or no personal notice; further that implementation took place faster than promised; further that this gave no time to make alternative pension plans; and further that retirement plans have been shattered with devastating consequences.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): I rise to present this petition, signed by over 500 of the residents of Hove and Portslade, on behalf of the Women Against State Pension Inequality campaign. The women who have signed the petition and those who would be beneficiaries of the petition have discovered the heartbreaking news that their plans, hopes and anticipation for retirement have been shattered. These women have acted with such good grace, dignity and unstoppable determination. They are a credit to our community, and I hope that the Government take heed of this petition.

The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

The petition of residents of Hove.

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I rise to present a petition on behalf of my constituents in Telford, relating to the implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts.

My petition is identical to those already presented, so I will not read it out, and in any event I do not have my glasses.

The Petition of residents of Telford.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): I rise to present a petition from 26 residents of the Bury North constituency, collected by my constituent Mrs Christine Wootton, relating to the implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts. This petition is in the same terms as others presented today and on several recent days. It concludes:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

The Petition of residents of Bury North.

Tom Elliott (Fermanagh and South Tyrone) (UUP): I rise to present a petition on behalf of several hundred residents of Fermanagh and South Tyrone, relating to the implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts. The petition is identical to the one presented by the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), who has already referred to its content so I will not read out the full text. I wish to pay tribute to Wilma Grey, the Northern Ireland co-ordinator of this petition and the lobby group, who is also from Fermanagh and South Tyrone. It concludes:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

The Petition of residents of Fermanagh and South Tyrone.
Yemen

Motion made, and Question proposed. That this House do now adjourn.—[Steve Brine.]

6.47 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I am grateful to the House for allowing this vitally important debate. I was surprised that a Minister from the Department for International Development and not the Foreign Office is representing the Government, as this debate is primarily on foreign affairs matters. Observers have always feared that the FCO would like to take control of DFID: perhaps tonight we are seeing a reverse takeover. The Minister's knowledge of this area, however, is not in doubt and I am pleased to see him in his place.

This debate occurs at one of the most critical moments in Yemen's long history. In August, UN-backed peace talks in Kuwait between the Houthi rebels and the Yemeni Government broke down, leading to intense fighting and a restarting of the airstrikes. Thousands have died in the following months. Only last week, 140 people were killed and 500 injured in an airstrike on a funeral in Sana’a. The Saudi Government have now apologised for that incident, blaming the bombing on bad intelligence. What a terrible reason to die.

This morning, a 72-hour ceasefire was announced by UN Special Envoy Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed. It will begin at midnight tomorrow. All our eyes may be on Syria and Iraq, but tonight we in the British Parliament invite the world to focus on Yemen's forgotten crisis. Our message to the Government is quite simple: either we stop the fighting permanently or Yemen will bleed to death.

I have been privileged to serve as chair of the all-party group on Yemen since joining Parliament. I am very proud that there are so many Members who are interested in Yemen and so many Members present today. Several Members of this House were born in Yemen, including myself, my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) and the hon. Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond). She is an officer of the all-party group on Yemen since joining Parliament. I am very proud of this area, however, is not in doubt and I am pleased to see him in his place.

These parliamentary ties further demonstrate the unique relationship our country has had with Yemen over the past 150 years. When Yemen was last in crisis, during the Arab Spring of 2011, it was the British Government, in particular the current Minister of State at the Foreign Office, the right hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan), who was later the Prime Minister's envoy to Yemen, who worked with the Yemeni Government. We supported Yemen through that crisis, which, other than Tunisia, was the only peaceful democratic revolution in the middle east. We continue to be one of the largest bilateral aid donors, and the International Development Secretary has just raised our contribution to a total of £100 million. In turn, Yemenis have a great love of Britain. When the Yemeni Foreign Minister Riad Yassin visited Parliament last year, he brought with him a video. It was not a video of the ongoing conflict, which we were aware of, but of our Queen's last visit to Aden, where the local hospital I was born in was named after her.

This positive history therefore makes the current situation all the more tragic. Through a sluggish, confused and weak approach to the crisis, the international community as a whole should be measured against a scoreboard of shame: over 10,000 people have been killed in the past 18 months; at least 1,200 children have been killed, with another 1,700 injured; 3 million people are now suffering from acute malnutrition; 21.2 million people, four-fifths of the entire population, require urgent humanitarian assistance, 9.9 million of whom are children; 3.2 million people are internally displaced; 19.3 million people are in need of health care and protection services; and 14.4 million people, equivalent to the combined populations of London, Birmingham and Glasgow, are at risk of hunger.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): The impact on the most vulnerable in society in Yemen is simply immeasurable. It is our job in this House to stand up against what is wrong. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that we are instead enabling that?

Keith Vaz: I agree wholeheartedly with the hon. Lady. I commend her party and its Members for the way in which they have raised Yemen on so many occasions. I am grateful, and the House is very grateful, for that. She is right that we need to do much more. Organisations such as Save the Children, UNICEF, Islamic Relief, Médecins sans Frontières and the Red Cross are performing wonders on the ground, but they are struggling to get the funding needed for emergency programmes.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): My right hon. Friend will be interested to know that I recently travelled to the World Bank with RESULTS UK to put forward the argument that the first 1,000 days of a child's life are vital for their development. This means that even when the conflict ends, the effects will not stop. They will not cease. Millions of children will be left stunted with delayed cognitive development and may still die, despite the conflict ending. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we need to be doing more to find a peaceful solution?

Keith Vaz: I do, and I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I agree wholeheartedly.

When faced with a crisis of these proportions, one would have expected, as my hon. Friend has said, that the international community, led by the UK, would be urgently bringing the conflict to an end, and putting this at the very top of the agenda at the United Nations. Instead, when faced by this reality, the world has failed Yemen. We failed to stop the escalation of violence in
March last year, and we failed to stop the fighting over the last 18 months. We have had two clear opportunities for a sustainable end to the fighting: a brief ceasefire for negotiations in April this year ended in failure; and the UN-sponsored round of talks in Kuwait ended in failure in August. Will the Minister confirm whether or not the UK Government were invited to these negotiations? Were we actually in the room?

**Edward Argar** (Charnwood) (Con): The right hon. Gentleman’s knowledge of, and care for, the country of Yemen is well known. Does he agree that what would make the greatest difference to the humanitarian situation in Yemen would be a stable ceasefire followed by a long-term sustainable peace settlement, and that while that settlement must originate from among the Yemeni peoples themselves and not be imposed from outside, the unique historical relationship that the UK has with Yemen, to which the right hon. Gentleman was alluding, makes us well placed to help facilitate the delivery of that settlement, building on the work of the Minister for Europe and the Americas, my right hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan)?

**Keith Vaz:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman, who is vice-chairman of the all-party group. He is right to highlight, as I have done, the role of the right hon. Member for Rutland and Melton. There is a vacancy for a special envoy for Yemen, and if I could persuade the Prime Minister to send him there, among all his other duties, the right hon. Gentleman would make a very good contribution.

Amid this lack of diplomatic progress, the intervention by the Saudi-led coalition has become central to the crisis. This coalition intervened at the request of the legitimate Government of Yemen. However, 18 months on, the airstrikes, which are heavily impacting on the civilian population, have become counter-productive—so counter-productive that it has become the eye of a storm of intense criticism, which overshadows every other element of the crisis. These airstrikes, which Save the Children believes to be responsible for 60% of all civilian deaths in the conflict, are breeding hostility inside and outside Yemen.

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend is making a strong speech. He will be aware of the reports of the International Development Committee and the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee on this very matter, but is he aware that yesterday a number of us, along with UK Government Ministers, met the Saudi Foreign Minister? While we had a frank and candid discussion about the terrible attack on the funeral hall, the Saudi Foreign Minister refused to give any clarity about when and to what level investigations would take place into the hundreds of other incidents reported by leading non-governmental organisations. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is imperative that the Saudis are clear about what has happened in those incidents and allow an independent investigation?

**Keith Vaz:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I commend him for the work he has done. I know he has a large Yemeni community in Cardiff South and Penarth. It is right to bring this to the attention of the Saudis—a theme I hope to develop later in my speech.

**Douglas Chapman** (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): We all recognise and welcome moves for a ceasefire. However, two Select Committees have endorsed the view that UK arms exports to Saudi Arabia should cease. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the Government should respect the findings of those Committees and stop arms sales until a proper investigation into the atrocities in Yemen takes place, or indeed a permanent ceasefire is put in place?

**Keith Vaz:** I agree. When I come on to look at the implications of the ceasefire, I shall certainly make that one of my asks to the Minister.

**Dr Philippa Whitford** (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): It is the issue of the extra petrol that we are pouring on the flames that is key. I have raised on a number of occasions the bombing of Médecins Sans Frontières hospitals, particularly in Sana’a last autumn. We are always told that “Saudi Arabia will investigate”, but that is not good enough. We should not be selling arms in this situation.

**Keith Vaz:** I agree with the hon. Lady wholeheartedly. That is something on which we must press the Government if we are to achieve a peaceful solution.

**Chris White** (Warwick and Leamington) (Con) rose—

**Keith Vaz:** I give way to the Chair of the Committees on Arms Export Controls.

**Chris White:** I know that a couple of questions have been asked by Members who have served on the Committees—

7 pm

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

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—[Steve Brine.]

**Chris White:** I did not know that I had that effect on the House.—[Laughter.]

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** It is known as the 7 o’clock effect.

**Chris White:** I am aware that the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) is familiar with a report in which the Business, Innovation and Skills and International Development Committees called for an independent United Nations-led investigation and a pause in the sale of arms exports until that had taken place. Does he agree that that could only assist in alleviating the humanitarian crisis?

**Keith Vaz:** I do agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I commend him for the work that he and his Committees are doing. We look forward to seeing the report when it is finally published, but I think that the Government will note his comments very carefully.

**Mrs Flick Drummond** (Portsmouth South) (Con): Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that the United States Congress recently passed the Justice Against Sponsors...
of Terrorism Act, which is aimed at the Saudis? Does he think that that is why the Saudis are starting to scale back some of their attacks?

Keith Vaz: My fellow Yemeni—by birth—is right. I think that the pressure in the United States Congress, to which I shall allude later, is making a difference, especially given recent events. I think that it takes more than the United Kingdom to do this and that Congress has a very important role.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): The right hon. Gentleman is being extremely generous in giving way to all of us. He is probably aware of the use of cluster munitions in Yemen and the problems that they have caused for civilians by lying unexploded, thus creating de facto minefields which can kill or maim. Will he join me in calling on the Government to review the support that they are giving to the organisations involved in clearing those munitions?

Keith Vaz: Yes, I will. We do need to support those organisations. I think that I am able to give way so often thanks to the BBC debate running a little short. Whether we like or hate the BBC, we should thank it for allowing us this extra time.

A generation of Yemenis now risk learning how to hate Saudi Arabia and the west. At a recent meeting organised by the Council for the Advancement of Arab-British Understanding, journalists Nawal al-Maghafi and Peter Oborne, who had recently returned from Yemen, said that the long history of goodwill towards Britain was almost eroded. The strength of that criticism means that when we are critical of Russia’s actions in Syria, it is now pointing at Yemen and claiming moral equivalency. That is not sustainable. Yemen is now the Achilles heel of western diplomacy. Quite simply, it is in everyone’s best interests, including Saudi Arabia’s, for the airstrikes to end permanently.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on initiating the debate. Does he agree that if the United Kingdom Government’s review of its arms sales uncovers breaches of international law by the kingdom of Saudi Arabia in Yemen, there should be not only an end to the sales of arms to Saudi Arabia, but a root-and-branch review of our relationship with the kingdom?

Keith Vaz: That is a very important point. The Chair of the Committees on Arms Export Controls will have heard what the hon. Gentleman has said. I think that this is one of the issues that the Committees, and other Committees of the House, will have to examine—indeed, they are doing so as we speak.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Keith Vaz: I will.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. No, you cannot.

Emily Thornberry: Am I not allowed to intervene?

Mr Deputy Speaker: No.

Keith Vaz: I have never been able to shut my hon. Friend up.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I have succeeded where the right hon. Gentleman could not.

Keith Vaz: I will put that in my diary, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Let me return to the serious issue of Yemen. The issues of the investigations of the bombings, which have been mentioned by several Members, and the UK’s sale of arms to Saudi Arabia have been raised here tonight, and also outside Parliament. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, as well as Oxfam, Amnesty International and others, have identified, as have hon. Members this evening, the human rights violations committed by all sides. The latter of those organisations argues that DFID’s good work is being undermined by £3.3 billion of aircraft and bombs sales to Saudi Arabia in the 12 months from March 2015.

The Saudi Arabian Government have investigated incidents, but these investigations have been criticised for not being independent. They must understand that continuing the bombing campaign will lead only to more incidents and criticism, and calls for further investigations.

We are joined by the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood), and I am grateful to him for reinforcing the Government’s position tonight. Only one of the Ministers present will be able to speak in this debate, but I would like them both to clarify a number of points. What support is the UK providing Saudi Arabia with regards to both preventing and investigating human rights violations, including through providing personnel? What is the UK’s policy on an independent investigation into possible human rights violations by all sides in the conflict? What is the current status of UK arms sales to Saudi Arabia, and will this be subject to review?

Just as it is darkest before the dawn, the international community is finally moving in the right direction. After the Houthis fired on the USS Mason last week, the Americans fired back, into Yemen, for the first time in this conflict. Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump talked about Syria at length in their last debate; it is hoped that they will be asked about Yemen tomorrow. Let us not forget that Secretary Clinton was the first Secretary of State in history to visit Yemen.

On Sunday, in London, US Secretary of State John Kerry and the Foreign Secretary met Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir and the UN special envoy to discuss this conflict. At the meeting, they made a very clear call for a ceasefire “within hours”. An hour is clearly a long time in diplomacy, but at last today a 72-hour ceasefire has been announced. This is most welcome, but it is not the end. Seventy-two hours is not enough for the Yemeni people. It is vital that our Government ensure that the ceasefire becomes permanent.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I have been listening with interest to the right hon. Gentleman’s speech. He made reference to the Houthis firing on a US naval ship. Does he agree that one of the things that is so worrying about the conflict is the possibility of threatening some of the key shipping routes that pass through Aden, which might destabilise the whole region?
Keith Vaz: That is absolutely right. As I will say towards the end of my speech, that has an effect on the humanitarian aid getting into Yemen.

I spoke last night with the UK’s permanent representative to the United Nations, the excellent Matthew Rycroft, who made it clear that the UK leads on this issue at the Security Council. He also confirmed that the UK had already drafted a Security Council resolution. It will call for an end to hostilities, investigations into human rights violations and a restart of the negotiations. It is in response to this that Saudi Arabia and the other gulf states have put together their own pre-emptive ceasefire. That is clearly welcome, but will the Minister confirm that if the coalition’s ceasefire breaks in 72 hours’ time and violence resumes, the UK will immediately demand that the draft resolution is tabled? Will he also confirm that when Yemen is discussed by the Security Council in New York on 31 October, the United Kingdom will demand a joint statement calling for a permanent diplomatic solution?

Now that the ceasefire is in place, we must take a central role in the peace talks. Will the Minister confirm who will be in the room for these talks? Will the talks include the United Kingdom, the United States, the Saudi Government, the Houthis, former President Saleh and the Yemeni Government? It needs to be made clear at the talks that concluding without an agreement is not an option. As her predecessors have done, will the Prime Minister herself call on both King Salman of Saudi Arabia and President Hadi to press for peace?

Despite the criticism that the United Kingdom has faced in recent months, we can still be the honest broker, and that means putting pressure on all sides, including those who receive British support. Is the United Kingdom prepared to sanction the Yemeni and Saudi Governments by withdrawing support, suspending arms sales or in other ways if they allow the next round of negotiations to fail? We also need to give the UN special envoy all the tools that he needs to do his job. Will the Minister tell the House what support, including staff and finances, we have provided to the special envoy?

Another step that we need to take relates to humanitarian access. This is vital not only to address the humanitarian crisis, but to show that the United Kingdom wishes to act for the Yemeni people. In the scoreboard of shame that I mentioned, I have set out the reality in Yemen, which is an extraordinarily dangerous place for aid agencies to work. Some parts of the country, particularly in the north, are practically unreachable. Following the closure of Sana’a airport, the cutting off of major roads and bridges and the withdrawal of safety assurances, UNICEF has informed me that many aid agencies have withdrawn from Saada and Hajjah. The increase in aid is welcome, but what are we doing to ensure that it gets through? We must do more, and this must be included in the UN resolution.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman has once again brought this subject to the House for debate. It is important that these issues are raised. He talks about access for aid agencies, which is absolutely crucial. Médecins sans Frontières is finding it very difficult to maintain hospitals in the country and reports that, even where there are hospitals, the situation is so unsafe and people are so frightened to leave their homes that by the time they reach the hospital, they are often seriously ill, with some of them sadly dying. Will he impress on the Government that we need to act in support of those medical facilities as well?

Keith Vaz: The hon. Lady has just done that very eloquently. The worst part of the bombing of the funeral was that there were two bombs. The first killed the people at the funeral and the second was intended to deal with the first attenders. To say that such incidents are the result of bad information is a terrible excuse and that must never happen again.

I would like to end by telling the House that my interest in Yemen is not just political, but deeply personal. Yemen was once known as Arabia Felix, or “happy Arabia”, and that is how I remember the country. The first nine years of my life were among my happiest. Every night when I go home from this place, I think of Aden, and I light frankincense just to remind me of it.

Yemen is an easy country to fall in love with. It has incredible beauty, enormous history and wonderful people. Its geography and its architecture are among the most stunning in the world. It is renowned as the home of the legendary Queen of Sheba. It breaks my heart that incredible cultural heritage sites are being reduced to rubble by the fighting and that we will never be able to recreate them. We are part of this conflict; we cannot walk by on the other side. This is a crisis crying out for leadership. Saudi Arabia, the Yemeni Government, the Houthis and the Yemeni people all need a way out of this conflict. We are in a unique position to show them the way, and to take them there.

It has been said to me that we hold all the pens on Yemen. We need to use every ounce of our considerable influence. Anyone can hold the helm when the sea is calm. To allow millions of people to die from hunger in the 21st century would consign Yemen to being one of history’s great tragedies. Let us seize the momentum of the past few days and prevent a humanitarian crisis from becoming a humanitarian catastrophe. I beg the Minister to act now.

7.14 pm

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Rory Stewart): I begin by paying huge tribute to the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz). For as long as I have been in the House and long before I entered the House, he has been a great champion of the interests of Yemen. He understands Yemen, as he pointed out, from his early childhood and brings to the issue a level of knowledge and passion that is important in the House. Everyone on both sides of House has emphasised that the situation is a horrible tragedy—nearly 80% of the population currently face a humanitarian crisis. More than 1 million children face food shortages and almost 400,000 literally struggle to know where the next meal will come from.

I will take a couple of moments to talk about the causes and origins of the conflict, because it is important to consider them when addressing it. When I last visited Yemen in the spring of 2014, despite all the underlying fragility—the considerable south-north divides, the sectarian splits between the Houthis and other members of Yemeni society, and the extreme poverty—we were looking at a situation in which the national dialogue seemed to be working. There was a remarkable period of relative
stability between 2011 and 2014. I pay tribute to Benomar, who was the UN special envoy at the time, and to the extraordinary work of the ambassadors from the Gulf Co-operation Council, the EU ambassador, who had served in Afghanistan and spoke fluent Arabic, the US ambassador, who was a fluent Arabist, and the French ambassador, who also spoke fluent Arabic. Unfortunately, however, despite all the work done in 2014, the situation deteriorated rapidly so that by the beginning of 2015 we found ourselves facing the horror that we see today. There are certain lessons that we need to draw from that to understand how we went wrong and to solve future conflicts.

The first and central thing is to apportion blame. We cannot shy away from the fact that the actions of ex-President Saleh and the Houthis are at the core of the conflict. They attacked the legitimate Government of President Hadi. There are certain lessons that we need to draw from that.

Partly through pressure on President Hadi to reduce fuel subsidies, international development actors helped to create a situation in which instability was encouraged by the cutting of those fuel subsidies—although much of the responsibility must lie with President Hadi and how he implemented the cuts. Corruption in Sana’a and Yemen was also a huge mobiliser of popular resentment in the countryside.

Rory Stewart: I pay tribute to Jane Marriott, our ambassador at the time, to the work done by her predecessor, John Wilkes, and to the DFID work that took place behind the scenes. Such things are difficult and I am not in the business of second guessing officials, but the lesson we should draw from all these conflicts is the one that I pointed to earlier: the international community must be cautious not to become over-optimistic and to be aware of the ways in which talking to an elite in the capital and engaging with the civil society in Sana’a misled us about the real resentment that existed in the countryside.

How do we address the situation now? Central to that is understanding that decades of ex-President Saleh’s policies lie underneath the problems we face today. He deliberately exacerbated those tribal divisions and deliberately created that culture of corruption and impunity, which he is now so expertly exploiting in order to maintain instability in that country. But we cannot be naive here: simply removing ex-President Saleh is not going to solve this problem on its own. The problems in Yemen go much deeper than that and need to be addressed systematically, from politics through to the humanitarian dimension.

Let me touch on those two things. As the right hon. Gentleman pointed out, politics is at the centre of this—politics, politics, politics. Characteristically, he asked 10 questions, which I have to deal with in less than 10 minutes, but I will try to deal with them quickly before moving on. Hon. Members will notice that his 10 questions have largely focused on what I would call the high politics and diplomacy, and I will try to address them one by one and then take this into the bigger issue of the solution to the Yemeni conflict. First, he asked what the UK’s position is in relation to the Kuwait talks. The answer is that those talks were held between the parties in the conflict—the regional players and the Yemenis themselves. The UK ambassador to Yemen was present and was in the room, but in a diplomatic capacity and not as a party to the conflict.

Secondly, the right hon. Gentleman asked what support we are providing to Saudi Arabia. The current operations are, of course, Saudi-led, and the United Kingdom is not embedded in the Saudi military operations. As the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood) pointed out in his statement today, we are very clear that the investigation needs to be led, in the first instance, by the Saudi Government, just as similar investigations of the United States or the United Kingdom Governments for actions taking place in Afghanistan and Iraq were led first and foremost by those Governments. He has said, however, that if that investigation is not adequate, he will look at this again.

Stephen Doughty: The Saudi Foreign Minister told us yesterday that the UK had provided both technical and personnel support to investigations for the past six to eight months, and that advice had been provided on targeting. As one of the guardians of the humanitarian principle, will the Minister be clear about what support has been provided by the Department for International Development specifically in relation to investigating violations of humanitarian law?

Rory Stewart: I am happy to provide more detail, but, in essence, we currently provide two forms of support and I will elaborate on this in a written answer. We provide training and capacity support, which includes statements about international humanitarian law, but that is not about this military operation—that is in general for the royal Saudi air force. Secondly, my Department and the Foreign Office have worked together through the UN process on international humanitarian law, particularly in a meeting in Geneva last month—this is partly in response to the question raised by the right hon. Member for Leicester East—where we are pushing for more staffing for the independent UN investigation on human rights through the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and, in particular, its Yemen office.

The right hon. Gentleman asked a question about arms sales. We take those sales very seriously. As Members from both sides of the House are aware, the report by the Committees on Arms Export Controls was divided,
but we continue to monitor carefully all actions of international humanitarian law, although this is not a prime responsibility of my Department. He asked whether we would be in the room for peace talks, and we absolutely will. Our current ambassador, Edmund Fitton-Brown, is very close to the UN representative, and so long as these are not talks taking place between the parties to the conflict, the UK is present in a diplomatic capacity.

The right hon. Gentleman asked whether the Prime Minister would be prepared to call King Salman of Saudi Arabia and President Hadi. Of course, as the right hon. Gentleman is aware, on Sunday the Foreign Secretary met the Saudi Foreign Minister, but more than that the Saudi Foreign Minister came to this House of Commons yesterday to be directly accountable to this Parliament. Indeed, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East spoke to President Hadi in a visit to Saudi Arabia last week. The right hon. Gentleman asked about sanctions. Of course we will continue to put pressure on all parties to this conflict to support the current peace. He asked whether we are providing support for the special envoy, and the answer is that the UK Government are providing more than £1 million of direct support for the staff of Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, the UN special envoy to Yemen.

In the remaining minutes, I hope to talk about the broader context, in addition to all the good 10 points the right hon. Gentleman raised. We need to look at politics at local and regional level.

Keith Vaz: This must be a first—a Minister is given a set of questions and he replies to every one of them. I do not think that I have ever come across that in my 29 years in this House—well done. Will the hon. Gentleman address the issue of the ceasefire? We know that we have 72 hours. Can we please try to ensure that it is longer, because 72 hours is not enough? I know that there are many other things to talk about, but that ceasefire is critical.

Rory Stewart: We absolutely agree that the ceasefire is critical and that 72 hours in and of itself is not enough, but as the right hon. Gentleman is aware, the only way in which we can do any kind of peace or conflict resolution is the way through to Cambodia is to start with small steps. It is vital to begin with those 72-hour moves. That is why the UN special envoy has done it and why we and the United States are strongly supportive of it. We will of course do all we can to extend that ceasefire, because we do need longer. Indeed, what we want is a political settlement in place, which brings me to the broader question of politics. There are two dimensions to that: we need to acknowledge that this is taking place in a broader peninsula context, and that lasting peace will come only if we address the local-level conflicts taking place on the ground in Yemen. Our humanitarian response—this is a debate about the humanitarian crisis—needs to take that into account.

I wish to make some brief observations on the nature of DFID’s humanitarian response. First, we need to approach this with some degree of humility. The right hon. Gentleman has quite rightly pointed to the important role that the United Kingdom plays. We do indeed hold the pen at the Security Council. We have put £100 million into this, and it is true that we play an important role in the Quad, but we are not the only people here and we cannot act as though we are. We have to make sure that we acknowledge the role of the United States, Saudi Arabia, and other states such as Oman, but above all we must acknowledge the role of the Yemeni people themselves. The only real solution here will come from the Yemeni people. We need to acknowledge again that, although the United Kingdom has put in £100 million, the current UN appeal is only 47% met. We were very pleased at the UN General Assembly to raise another £50 million from other partners, but we still need to do much more.

We cannot at the moment, as an international community, adequately address all the 21 million people who are currently at risk, so we need to prioritise. We need to make sure that we focus on the most vulnerable people. First, we need to protect civilians; secondly, we need to make absolutely sure that we focus on food security—it is an absolute tragedy that we are seeing extremes of malnutrition and we must make sure that that does not turn into a famine; and thirdly, we need to make it absolutely certain that, whenever we are dealing with anyone in Yemen, we look at preventable disease. It is a tragedy that cholera is now breaking out in Sana’a.

Commerce and shipping will be absolutely central. We need to get the markets working, get the ships into Yemen, and understand that this is not just a development and a humanitarian response.

I will finish by paying tribute to the right hon. Gentleman, to the very strong work both of the UK Government and of the UN special envoy Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, and to the extraordinary work of the humanitarian organisations, which work in very difficult circumstances. I am talking about the suffering that has been experienced by Mercy Corps, the International Committee of the Red Cross and Médecins Sans Frontières. Above all, it is the Yemenis—not just internationals—who are bearing the burden of this, who are out in those field offices, and who are delivering aid in some of the most testing conditions on earth. If we can plan now for the medium to long term, think hard about the stabilisation and the politics that are at the root of this, and ensure that we get the economic framework in place so that if we are lucky enough to have a ceasefire, we are really able to move to a situation in which we have a sustainable economy in Yemen for the future. If we can sometimes do less than we pretend, we can do much more than we fear.

Question put and agreed to.

7.29 pm
House adjourned.
House of Commons

Wednesday 19 October 2016

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Infrastructure Investment

1. Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on future infrastructure investment in Wales.

Alun Cairns: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for the work he is doing cross-border with the Mersey Dee Alliance and the all-party group on Mersey Dee North Wales. That resonates with our policy to develop a growth deal that works on a cross-border basis. We are working with those who are developing the north Wales growth deal. We are in negotiations on that. We have recently received the Growth Track 360 bid, and we will analyse that in due course. We are keen to work together, and with the Welsh Government.

2. [906621] Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): As my right hon. Friend knows, train passengers from and to my constituency use part of the Great Western railway line. When will the new intercity express trains for the Great Western rail line be operational?

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend highlights the investment in the Great Western main line, and much attention is rightly drawn to the infrastructure of the electrification itself. However, it is fair to say that, as soon as we have electrified as far as Didcot or Swindon, the new trains will be operational, so his constituents, my constituents and those in Wales and the south-west in general will benefit from modern trains well before the infrastructure has been completed.

3. Susan Elan Jones (Clwyd South) (Lab): Roads are critical in infrastructural investment—roads on both sides of the border. What conversations has the right hon. Gentleman had with the Welsh Government about the A5/A483, which goes from Oswestry towards the Wrexham area, given the particular road safety problems in the community of Chirk?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Lady raises an important point. It is something that has crossed the discussions over the north Wales growth deal, and it underlines the interconnectivity of the region she mentions with Manchester, Merseyside and north Wales. We are working closely with the Welsh Government on their infrastructure plan and the national infrastructure plans for the whole of the United Kingdom. It is important that they dovetail appropriately.

4. [906623] Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): The Minister will be aware of a range of infrastructure improvement proposals in the north Wales and Mersey Dee taskforce’s Growth Track 360 plan. Could he advise on the merits of seeking funding via a north Wales growth bid supported by cross-border partners to accelerate the delivery of those elements of the plan that are priorities in the short term, and would he help facilitate that?

Alun Cairns: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work he has done on this important issue. I think he drew attention to it at one of the first meetings immediately after the general election, and that started the discussions that have led to the Growth Track 360 proposal. There are growth elements and transport infrastructure elements, and it is important that we ensure that those come financial support from the UK Government. Will the UK Government give financial support to the growth bid?

5. Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend raises an important point. He rightly underlines the Barnett arrangements, and we were pleased to introduce a funding floor that provides Wales with £115 for every £100 that is spent in England. In addition, we have the electrification of the Great Western main line, North Wales prison is a significant project, and we have broadband roll-out. After all, we are interconnected economies, and the Government are determined to do the best for the whole of the UK.

6. [906626] Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): May I first associate myself with the right hon. Gentleman’s appropriate remarks concerning Aberfan?

I am pleased to hear the emphasis on infrastructure interconnectivity. The Minister will know that the excellent north Wales growth bid—supported by business, cross-party politicians and local authorities in north Wales—needs
together for the benefit of the whole region. I am happy to work with him and with the Department for Transport as we approach the control period 6 considerations that will take place in due course.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): I, too, associate my party and myself with the Secretary of State’s comments on the Aberfan disaster.

The Treasury aims to pool local government pension schemes in Wales and England to create wealth funds to invest in infrastructure, with each fund containing accumulated assets of £25 billion. Combined Welsh assets amount to £13 billion, meaning that if the Treasury has its way, Welsh funds will be swallowed up by a cross-border pool. Will the Secretary of State demand a specific Welsh wealth fund so that the contributions of Welsh local government workers are used to invest in infrastructure projects in Wales?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman raises a fairly technical area of policy. Appropriate economies of scale are involved in this. I am happy to discuss the details with him. The Welsh Government have made their views clear. However, it is not only about “Welsh money for Wales”—which, on the face of it, would sound good—but about having the economies of scale such that we can access funding elsewhere as well. Therefore, it is not necessarily the right thing, but I am certainly not closed to the idea.

Swansea Bay City Deal

2. Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): What recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on whether funding for the Swansea bay city deal will be included in the autumn statement.

Geraint Davies: The Minister will know that Brexit will deal a major body blow to Swansea’s universities and the Swansea region overall. What assurances can he give that in the autumn statement the Chancellor will make a firm commitment to put his money where his mouth is, because we want hard cash, not hot air, to provide the required support for jobs and prosperity in the area?

Guto Bebb: First, I should correct the hon. Gentleman: the city of Swansea voted to leave, so if there was a body blow to Swansea, it was delivered by people in Swansea. On the city deal, he has to be slightly fairer about what this Government are doing. We have delivered a city deal for Cardiff, with over £1 billion of investment, including £500 million from this Government, and a guarantee that the European elements would be supported. If the Swansea city deal is as good as early indications appear to suggest, it can be supported by this Government in due course.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): The Swansea bay city deal aims to turn the region, which includes Neath, into a digital super-hub to boost the local economy, transform energy delivery, and improve health and social care. Will the Minister assure the House that this deal will not face the delays experienced by the Swansea bay tidal lagoon and rail electrification projects?

Guto Bebb: It is important to point out that this was announced in the last Budget and is being taken forward. However, there is a bottom-up approach. This Government do not take the view that Westminster knows best. We believe very strongly that the proposal should come from the region, and it is fantastic to see the way in which the four local authorities are working together. I am confident that the deal brings something quite special to south-west Wales, but let us see the detail. If the detail is persuasive, the support will be forthcoming.

Rail Electrification

3. Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): What recent discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Transport on rail electrification in Wales.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): This week will see the completion of the engineering work in the Severn tunnel required for the electrification of the Great Western main line. This is a truly historic occasion and a clear demonstration of this Government’s commitment to deliver a rail investment strategy that will benefit the people of Wales in its entirety.

Justin Madders: The Secretary of State has spoken of the Growth Track 360 campaign, which, as the Minister will know, has the potential to transform the north Wales and Cheshire area by delivering 70,000 new jobs over 20 years. Improving the Wrexham to Bidston line, which serves Neston in my constituency, has been identified as the first priority for the team. Will the Minister join in the words of encouragement that we have already heard in agreeing to make representations to the Chancellor ahead of the autumn statement so as to deliver some of this much-needed investment?

Guto Bebb: I am pleased to echo the words of the Secretary of State, who highlighted the Growth Track 360 proposals. These are made in north Wales or made in north-west England proposals which will try to improve connectivity between parts of north-west England and north-east Wales. We are supportive of the proposals. I am pleased to say that this morning the Treasury wrote to the proposers in north Wales stating that support.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): Some £738 million has been ring-fenced for the electrification of the valley lines, although that is not expected to be completed until at least 2022 or 2023. What assurances has the Minister had that the £120 million
from the European regional development fund will still be forthcoming for this project before the UK leaves the EU?

Guto Bebb: The situation is very clear. The proposals for the south Wales metro are part of the Cardiff city deal. They are a significant investment, and they include a contribution of around £110 million from the European fund. My understanding from the Treasury is that it will, if necessary, underwrite that element of the contribution, but if the proposals move forward in a timely manner, the European elements will be funded by the European Union.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): I associate myself with the words of the Secretary of State on Aberfan. In 1966, I was the same age as the schoolchildren who were killed in that tragedy. My predecessor Cledwyn Hughes, who was Secretary of State for Wales, said that that was the darkest day of his life when Aberfan lost a generation.

On rail integration, can the Minister tell the House whether he has had discussions with the Welsh Government, and indeed the Irish Government, about connectivity between rail and the port of Holyhead?

Guto Bebb: I assure the hon. Gentleman, who is a keen advocate of rail links in north Wales, that the Wales Office has had discussions with the Welsh Government, with the Irish Government and, just as importantly, with the Rail Minister at Westminster.

Margaret Greenwood (Wirral West) (Lab): What recent discussions has he had with the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on the Swansea bay tidal lagoon project?

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): I remain in close contact with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on the proposed lagoon at Swansea bay. This is an exciting project for Wales. I am due to meet Charles Hendry tomorrow to gain an update on the progress of the independent review, and I look forward to reading the findings when he reports later this autumn.

Margaret Greenwood: Last week, Sheffield Forgemasters and a host of other industrial companies in the northern powerhouse urged Charles Hendry to back a methane tidal lagoon project, so I welcome the Secretary of State’s comments. If the Government will not listen to Wales, will they listen to the industrial north and finally get on with the Swansea bay tidal lagoon project?
Alun Cairns: I recognise the hon. Lady’s interest in all things environmental, but Charles Hendry’s review has been seen as a positive intervention. The approach he has taken has been welcomed, as has been pointed out, not only by the lagoon company, local authorities and politicians, but by the business community in south Wales and across the northern powerhouse. We recognise the contribution that it could make, and we are looking forward to his judgment.

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): While it is important to take the findings of the Hendry review into account, will the Secretary of State press for progress on this exciting project as soon as it reports? The project not only has the potential to deliver clean energy, but will continue to build on the success, vibrancy and ambition that characterises Swansea and Wales.

Alun Cairns: My hon. Friend, like me, looks forward to the Charles Hendry report. There is no doubt that, as a test project, it has great potential for Swansea bay, but he, like me, has an obligation to the taxpayer to ensure that it works for consumers and taxpayers, and that it represents good value for money for all concerned.

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): Having taken a bloody nose for Hinkley and a black eye for fracking, is it not about time that this Government took an energy decision that enjoys the full support of this House and of the population at large? Why hold up any further the British-made, British-owned tidal lagoon projects that could change the fortunes not only of Wales, but of manufacturing businesses across the country?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Lady and I agree that we would like something like that to be developed and to go ahead for the prospects and opportunities it will provide, but we have an obligation to the taxpayer: we have to ensure that it provides value for money. Only in recent weeks, the hon. Lady and her colleagues have complained about the cost of energy for Tata and other energy-intensive industries. It is important that we generate energy in a cost-effective way that suits consumers as well as taxpayers.

Tourism

5. Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): What steps he is taking to encourage increased tourism to Wales.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman. Gentleman for his time as shadow Secretary of State and thank him for his contribution at the Dispatch Box in that role.

As the House will know, tourism is vital to delivering economic growth in Wales. It has been a great year for inbound tourism in the UK and in Wales, with day visits increasing by 24% in the last 12 months.

Paul Flynn: Will the Minister pay tribute to the magnificent tourist attractions in Newport—Tredegar House, the wetlands, Celtic Manor, and the splendid Roman baths and amphitheatre—all of which increased tourist numbers last year by up to 70%? Will he confirm that visitors to all parts of Wales always praise the warmth of our hospitality?

Guto Bebb: I clearly agree fully with the comment about the welcome in Wales. In particular, I pay tribute to the South Wales Argus and its “We’re Backing Newport” campaign, which highlights the fact that Newport is not just a great place to live, but a great place to visit.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): With B&Bs such as the Old Rectory on the Lake and the Ty’n y Cornel in Tal-y-llyn under new management and prepared, I hope, to do bar mitzvahs and gay weddings, does the Minister not agree with me that Welsh B&Bs offer a warm welcome to the English?

Guto Bebb: I agree with my hon. Friend. Friend that Welsh bed and breakfasts offer a great welcome, whether people are English, Welsh or any other nationality. They are a key part of the Welsh tourism offer, and they are to be applauded for the work they do.

Mr Mark Williams (Ceredigion) (LD): I associate myself and my colleagues with the tribute to the people of Aberfan on the 50th anniversary.

In a previous life, the Minister was a very passionate supporter of the campaign to reduce VAT on tourism. He has made some very pronounced comments about that campaign in the past. Does he stand by them? More importantly, what representations will he make to the Treasury to make such a case to benefit tourism in our communities?

Guto Bebb: The hon. Gentleman is perfectly right in saying that I am a politician who advocates lower taxes, so I welcome the fact that this Government have cut national insurance contributions for small businesses and are cutting corporation tax for small businesses. There is a case to be made on VAT for many sectors of the economy, and that case will be made by the Wales Office, but there are no promises, I am afraid.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Does the Minister agree that one dividend of Brexit has been the fall in the pound against the euro, meaning that holidays in Wales are now 15% cheaper for our European friends?

Guto Bebb: Certainly I am more than happy to agree with my hon. Friend. Friend that tourism in north Wales has done extremely well over the past few months. Last week I spoke to hoteliers in Llandudno, who were saying that they have enjoyed 90%-plus occupancy during the summer, so there has been a Brexit dividend in that respect.

Steel Industry

6. Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): What steps the Government are taking to support the steel industry in Wales.

The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns): I am in regular contact with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the First Minister and the Welsh Minister for the Economy. We have not lost focus while these issues have been out of the headlines. The Government leave no stone unturned in supporting the steel sector.
Alex Cunningham: What assurances can the Secretary of State give that, in the event of the completion of a joint venture by Tata Strip Products and ThyssenKrupp, commitments will be made on jobs, investment and the continuation of primary steel making at Port Talbot and across Wales?

Alun Cairns: It is in the UK’s strategic interests to maintain a steel-making capacity, and so quite obviously to maintain that at Port Talbot. The Government stand ready and waiting to support any bidder. It is a matter for Tata as to whether it pursues the joint venture. We are maintaining a relationship with Tata and other potential bidders that were in discussions earlier this year. We are keen to maintain a sustainable future.

Wayne David: Welsh steel is obviously of the highest quality, and I hope that when Heathrow airport is expanded Welsh steel will be used. In that sense, will the Secretary of State have a word with the Prime Minister to ensure that she stops faffing around on Heathrow expansion and that we have a positive decision as early as possible?

Alun Cairns: The hon. Gentleman tempts me, but he knows that that decision will be coming soon. He makes an important point about the use of steel in infrastructure projects. The UK Government have already changed procurement rules, making it easier for British steel to be used in contracts. For example, Crossrail, Europe’s largest civil engineering scheme, uses almost entirely British steel.

Gerald Jones: As the representative for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney, I too would like to associate myself with the comments of the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens), in relation to the 50th anniversary of the Aberfan disaster, an unimaginable loss for the families and, indeed, the whole community.

One major challenge—if not the major challenge—facing the Welsh steel industry is that its energy costs are far higher than those of our competitors. Despite warm words, little action has been taken. What action is the Secretary of State or the Government taking to bring down energy costs faced by energy-intensive industries?

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has a very personal constituency reason for wishing to acknowledge the anniversary of the Aberfan tragedy. Let us hear him with the courtesy he warrants.

Gerald Jones: Thank you, Mr Speaker. As the representative for Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney, I too would like to associate myself with the comments of the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens), in relation to the 50th anniversary of the Aberfan disaster, an unimaginable loss for the families and, indeed, the whole community.

One major challenge—if not the major challenge—facing the Welsh steel industry is that its energy costs are far higher than those of our competitors. Despite warm words, little action has been taken. What action is the Secretary of State or the Government taking to bring down energy costs faced by energy-intensive industries?

Alun Cairns: I welcome the hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State to their positions. He makes an important point on steel-making capacity and energy costs. He will be well aware that the energy-intensive industry package the Government have brought forward responded to the demands from the industry and from Tata specifically. We have reduced energy costs to the steel sector by £109 million, which has been welcomed and has put the sector in a much stronger position, with a turnaround in finance from a loss of £64 million to an operating profit of £95 million.

Arriva Trains Franchise

7. Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Welsh Government on the Arriva Trains franchise renewal.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): The in-principle agreement between the Welsh Government and the Department for Transport to devolve the Wales and Borders franchise was announced on 21 November 2014. We are engaging constructively with the Welsh Government to enable them to achieve the successful procurement of the next Wales and Borders franchise in October 2018.

Louise Haigh: Labour has tabled an amendment to the Digital Economy Bill to write free wi-fi into the renewal of any rail franchise. Does the Minister agree that this requirement would be welcomed by passengers in Wales and should be included in Arriva’s next franchise agreement?

Guto Bebb: This is a fair point. That would be appreciated by passengers in Wales. As part of the devolution package, that is something to be agreed between the Department for Transport and the Welsh Government, but I am sure they will have heard the hon. Lady’s comments.

Rural Broadband

8. Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): What plans his Department has to work with the Welsh Government on extending the roll-out of broadband in remote rural areas of Wales.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Guto Bebb): Ensuring rural areas of Wales benefit from our broadband roll-out is one of my key priorities. The UK Government have supported investment in broadband across rural Wales, including £14.2 million in Powys and £13.9 million in Gwynedd. The Secretary of State recently had positive discussions with the Welsh Government’s Cabinet Secretary for Infrastructure and the Minister for Science and Skills on future work to roll out broadband in Wales.

Sir Henry Bellingham: I thank the Minister for that reply. Does he agree with me that superfast broadband is a key driver for successful diversification in remote rural economies, and does he agree that it is time BT Openreach raised its game?

Guto Bebb: I am sure the mailbox of every MP would highlight the fact that it is time for BT Openreach to raise its game. On the importance of broadband to rural economic development, I can only agree fully with my hon. Friend. In my constituency of Aberconwy we have a call centre in Llanrwst, which is only in place as a result of the broadband roll-out encouraged by this Government’s funding.
Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): In a Twitter message to me, the director of BT in Wales said that the “vast majority of rural Wales, including Arfon, can already access superfast broadband”.

Does the Minister agree with her?

Guto Bebb: The “vast majority” is perhaps overstating the case, but the improvement over recent months has been spectacular, with rates of 90%-plus in many rural counties. There is still more work to be done, but in terms of rural broadband we are going in the right direction in Wales and the UK.

Hywel Williams: The main superfast broadband line passes the community of Crymlyn in my constituency, literally at the bottom of the people’s gardens. Many of these people run businesses from home and need to access substantial documents, but the download speed in Crymlyn would be an embarrassment even in the previous century. When will the Minister, or his Labour confederates in Cardiff, actually do something to remove this huge barrier to prosperity and economic growth?

Guto Bebb: The hon. Gentleman will be aware of the investment in his own constituency, which is approaching £12 million. There are still issues in relation to broadband roll-out in Wales, but sometimes we have to recognise that what has been achieved is tremendous. We are slightly ahead of the situation in England, which is something we should all applaud. However, I make no bones about the fact that more and faster broadband connectivity in Wales is crucial. The Wales Office will carry on pressurising BT Openreach to ensure that that is achieved sooner rather than later.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [906662] Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): If she will list her official engagements for Wednesday 19 October.

The Prime Minister (Mrs Theresa May): I know the whole House will wish to join me in remembering all those who lost their lives and were affected by the Aberfan disaster 50 years ago this week. It claimed the lives of 144 people, the vast majority of them children. It caused devastation to the local community. It is right that we pause and reflect on this important anniversary; and recognise the solidarity and resilience of the people of Aberfan to overcome this powerful tragedy.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. I will have further such meetings later today, in addition to my duties in this House.

Mr Bone: May I associate myself with the remarks of the Prime Minister? I am of an age that I can remember seeing on television those terrible scenes of what happened in Aberfan. I did not see the whole of Huw Edwards’ documentary, but I thought the bits that I happened to see last night were very poignant, as the right hon. Gentleman said. Interestingly, what it showed again was the issue of those in power not being willing to step up to the plate initially and to accept what had actually happened, but the inquiry was very clear about where the responsibility lay.

It is right that we are introducing parity of esteem for mental health in our national health service. We have waited too long for this, and it is important that it is being done. We are actually investing more in mental health services—an estimated record £11.7 billion. In particular, we are increasing the overall number of children’s beds to the highest number for mental health problems, which I think is important. There is, of course, more for us to do in looking at mental health, but we have made an important start and, as I say, that funding will be there.

The Prime Minister: First, like the right hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend, I join the Prime Minister in commemorating the disaster at Aberfan all those years ago when 118 children along with many adults died. Many in that community are still living with that tragedy, and they will live with it for the rest of their days. As a young person growing up at that time, I remember it well, particularly the collections for the disaster fund. The BBC documentary presented by Huw Edwards was brilliant and poignant, and serves to remind us all of what the disaster was about.

One in four of us will suffer a mental health problem. Analysis by the King’s Fund suggests that 40% of our mental health trusts had their budgets cut last year, and six trusts have seen their budgets cut for three years in a row. Is the Prime Minister really confident that we are delivering parity of esteem for mental health?

The Prime Minister: Calm down, Mr Speaker.

On the serious issue about prisons, I welcome the fact that my hon. Friend applauds the policy we are following of closing out-of-date prisons and building new ones. I hear the lobbying he has made for Wellingborough, and I can assure him that Wellingborough is one of the sites that is being considered. The Secretary of State will look at the issue very carefully and make an announcement in due course.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): I join the Prime Minister in paying tribute to the work of the Prime Minister in commemorating the disaster at Aberfan 50 years ago, and I am sure that the House will join me in remembering all those who lost their lives and were affected by that disaster. Many in Aberfan and Aberfan’s community are still living with that tragedy, and it is right that we remember it and the sacrifices that were made.

It is right that we are introducing parity of esteem for mental health in our national health service. We have waited too long for this, and it is important that it is being done. We are actually increasing the overall number of children’s beds to the highest number for mental health problems, which I think is important. There is, of course, more for us to do in looking at mental health, but we have made an important start and, as I say, that funding will be there.
Jeremy Corbyn: I received a letter from Colin, who has a family member with a chronic mental health condition. Many others, like him, have relatives going through a mental health crisis. He says that the “NHS is so dramatically underfunded” that too often it is left to the underfunded police forces to deal with the consequences of this crisis. Indeed, the chief constable of Devon and Cornwall has this month threatened legal action against the NHS because he is forced to hold people with mental conditions in police cells because there are not enough NHS beds. I simply ask the Prime Minister this: if the Government are truly committed to parity of esteem, why is this trust and so many others facing an acute financial crisis at the present time?

The Prime Minister: May I first of all say to Colin that I think all of us in this House recognise the difficulties people have when coping with mental health problems? I commend those in this House who have been prepared to stand up and refer to their own mental health problems. I think that has sent a very important signal to people with mental health issues across the country.

The right hon. Gentleman raises the whole question of the interaction between the NHS and police forces. I am very proud of the fact that when I was Home Secretary I actually worked with the Department of Health to bring a change to the way in which police forces dealt with people in mental health crisis. That is why we see those triage pilots out on the streets and better NHS support being given to police forces, so that the number of people who have to be taken to a police cell as a place of safety has come down. Overall, I think it has more than halved, and in some areas it has come down by even more than that. This is a result of the action that this Government have taken.

Jeremy Corbyn: The reality is that no one with a mental health condition should ever be taken to a police cell. Such people should be supported in the proper way, and I commend the police and crime commissioners who have managed to end the practice in their areas. The reality is, however, that it is not just Devon and Cornwall suffering cuts; the Norfolk and Suffolk mental health trust has been cut in every one of the last three years.

I agree with the Prime Minister that it is a very good thing for Members to stand up and openly discuss mental health issues that they have experienced, because we need to end the stigma surrounding mental health conditions throughout the country. However, NHS trusts are in a financial crisis. According to NHS Providers, it seems to be the worst financial crisis in NHS history: 80% of acute hospitals are now in deficit. There was a time, in 2010, when the NHS was in surplus. What has happened?

The Prime Minister: Let me remind the right hon. Gentleman what had been said by Simon Stevens, the chief executive of NHS England. At the time of the autumn statement last November, he said that “our case for the NHS has been heard and actively supported.”

The right hon. Gentleman also raised the question of social care, and the interaction between healthcare and social care. More than £5 billion extra was put into the better care fund in order to deal with precisely those issues, and local authorities are able to raise 2% of council tax to deal with the social care costs that they face. What is important, however, is for the health service and local authorities to work together to ensure that they deliver the best possible service to people who require that social care. I saw a very good example of that at Salford Royal on Monday, and I want to see more examples throughout the national health service, delivering for patients. We have put in the funding, which the right hon. Gentleman’s party would not have done, so that the NHS will receive better care for patients.

Jeremy Corbyn: We all want local government and the NHS to work closely together, but the problem is that local government funding has been cut, and 400,000 fewer people are receiving publicly funded social care as a result. The NHS is having difficulty coping with the crisis that it is in, and unfortunately there is bed-blocking. Acute patients cannot leave, because no social care is available for them somewhere down the line. The issue is a funding crisis in both the NHS and local government. Figures published by NHS trusts show that the total deficit is £2.45 billion, but the chief executive of NHS Providers says that the figure may be even bigger. The Government are disguising the extent of the crisis through temporary bailouts. [Interruption.] They are bailing out trusts in a crisis. That is, of course, a good thing, but why are the trusts in a crisis in the first place?

Next month, sustainability and transformation plans are going to be published. Many people across the country are quite alarmed by this because of the threat to accident and emergency departments. Will the Prime Minister deal with this issue now by quite simply saying...
there will be no downgrades and no closures of A&E departments in the statement coming out next month?

The Prime Minister: I say to the right hon. Gentleman that over the course of this Parliament, the Government will be spending over half a trillion pounds on the national health service. That is a record level of investment in our national health service. There is a key difference between the way the right hon. Gentleman approaches this and how I approach it: Conservative Members believe that people at a local level should be able to make decisions about the national health service, and that decisions about the national health service should be led by clinicians—it should not be a top-down approach, which is typical of the Labour party.

Jeremy Corbyn: Wow! Well, top-down was what we got. It cost £3 billion for a reorganisation that nobody wanted at all.

I started by asking the Prime Minister about parity of esteem. All this Government have produced is parity of failure—failing mental health patients; failing elderly people who need social care; failing the 4 million on NHS waiting lists; failing the five times as many people who are waiting more than four hours at A&E departments—and another winter crisis is looming. The Society for Acute Medicine has it right when it says that this funding crisis and the local government funding crisis are leaving the NHS “on its knees”.

The Prime Minister: What has happened in the NHS over the past six years? More patients being treated, more calls to the ambulance service, more operations, more doctors, more nurses—that is what has been happening in the NHS. But let us just look at the right hon. Gentleman’s party’s approach to the national health service: a former shadow Health Secretary said that it would be “irresponsible” to put more money into the national health service; and a former leader of the Labour party wanted to “weaponise” the national health service: a former shadow Health Secretary said that it was a record level of investment over the course of this Parliament, the Government will be spending over half a trillion pounds on the national health service. That is a key difference between the way the right hon. Gentleman approaches this and how I approach it: Conservative Members believe that people at a local level should be able to make decisions about the national health service, and that decisions about the national health service should be led by clinicians—it should not be a top-down approach, which is typical of the Labour party.

Angus Robertson (Moray) (SNP): I join the Prime Minister and the leader of the Labour party in remembering the Aberfan disaster. Our thoughts are with everyone affected by that.

Thousands of innocent civilians have now been killed by Saudi air strikes in Yemen. Can the Prime Minister assure the House that those civilians have not been killed by Paveway IV missiles partially manufactured in Scotland that are under licence from her Government to Saudi Arabia?

The Prime Minister: First, may I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his election as deputy leader of the Scottish National party?

As the right hon. Gentleman knows, we have one of the toughest regimes in the world in relation to arms exports. When allegations arise, we press—I have pressed in the past and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has pressed—the Saudi Arabia Government to properly investigate the issues and to learn lessons from them.

Angus Robertson: I thank the Prime Minister for her kind wishes but, to return to the subject of my question, it is beyond doubt that Saudi air forces are bombing Yemen. Planes made in Britain are being flown by pilots who were trained by Britain and dropping missiles that are made in Britain. I asked her a direct question and she could not answer it, so I will try a second time. Can she give the House an assurance that civilians have not been killed by Paveway IV bombs being dropped on Yemen that are partially manufactured in Scotland under licence by her Government? If she does not know the answer to that question, how can she possibly, in good conscience, continue selling them to Saudi Arabia?

The Prime Minister: In response to the right hon. Gentleman, the point that I made was very simple: we press for proper investigations into what has happened in those incidents before we reach a decision or a conclusion. We have a very strong relationship with Saudi Arabia, which is important for this country in terms of dealing with counter-terrorism and a number of other issues, but what matters, when incidents happen about which there is concern, is that they are properly investigated.

Q5. [906666] Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): A few weeks ago I thought that I had successfully bought four tickets online for one of my favourite bands, Green Day, only to be told that the tickets were unavailable and the gig was sold out, but within minutes I could buy the tickets on another site, for twice the price. It turns out that the ticket site had been the victim of a computerised attack by organised touts who then resell tickets at inflated prices. Will the Prime Minister ask her Ministers to give close consideration to my amendment to the Digital Economy Bill that would make the computerised harvesting of tickets for resale an offence? Similar legislation exists elsewhere, and it would go a long way towards protecting consumers and genuine music fans.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that issue. I am sure that he is not the only Member of the House who has had that experience, and he is certainly not the only person who has been affected, as Members will know from their constituency mailbags.
The Consumer Rights Act 2015 introduced a review of online ticket sales. Professor Mike Waterson’s independent report on online secondary ticketing makes a number of recommendations, including some whereby the industry itself could better protect itself from the problem. The Government will look very carefully at those recommendations to see what can be done to address the issue.

Q2. [906663] Lisa Nandy (Wigan) (Lab): The child abuse inquiry needs to regain the trust of survivors. In September, the Home Secretary said that she had no information about serious leadership failings, but on Monday she told the House that she had known about serious problems since July. Yesterday it emerged that senior Home Office officials were briefed as early as April.

The Prime Minister set up the inquiry and appointed the chair. She was the individual responsible for the inquiry’s success. She was the Home Secretary in April and the only person who had the power to act. Will she now finally tell us when she personally learned of the serious problems developing in the inquiry, and why she took no action at all?

The Prime Minister: I recognise that the hon. Lady has taken a particular interest in this issue. I am sure that she will recognise, as I hope other Members do, why it was that I set up the inquiry. For too long, people who had been subjected to child sexual abuse went unheard and they felt that they were not getting justice. That is why it is very important that the inquiry is able to continue and to find that justice for them.

I have to say to the hon. Lady that one of the important aspects of this is that, over the years, too many people have had concerns that those in positions of power have intervened to stop them getting justice. There were stories around about the inquiry and about individuals related to the inquiry, but the Home Secretary cannot intervene on the basis of suspicion, rumour or hearsay.

The hon. Lady refers to the statement that was made in this House yesterday about information being discussed with a director general at the Home Office. She will also have noted that it was asked that that conversation would be confidential, and it was, as far as I am aware, treated as such. It is important for us to recognise that when the Home Office was officially informed of issues, it acted. It is now for the inquiry to get on and deliver for victims and survivors.

Q8. [906669] Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): Having been born in and grown up in south Wales, and as a former Secretary of State for Wales, may I associate myself with the heartfelt tributes paid by Members on the Front Bench and throughout this House to the valley community of Aberfan? That absolutely unparalleled tragedy stunned the world. Will the Prime Minister now step up to the plate, to use her own words, reconfirm her commitment to Wales and ensure that her Government work with the Welsh Government, particularly after leaving the EU, to maintain the investment that is so vital to the long-term social and economic development of the valleys communities and the rest of Wales?

The Prime Minister: As a former Secretary of State for Wales, my right hon. Friend is well aware of the impact of the Aberfan disaster on south Wales and those local communities. As I said in my opening remarks, the events were absolutely tragic and the thoughts of the whole House are with those affected by them. I can give the commitment that she is asking for to Wales and to working with the Welsh Government. I am clear that this Government will deliver a country that works for everyone, and that means every part of the United Kingdom. Of course, the Wales Bill will put in place a historic transfer of powers to the Welsh Assembly. It will allow the Welsh Government to focus on the job of transforming the Welsh economy and, of course, we are talking to the Welsh Government about how we go forward with negotiations for leaving the EU.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Progress today has been very slow, so I appeal to colleagues to speed up. I call Stephen Pound.

Q4. [906665] Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I am much obliged, Mr Speaker. Can there be a single Member of this House who does not have reason to be grateful to those heroes of our high street, community pharmacists? Can there be any member of the public who is not as bemused as I am that the Government are proposing a 12% cut in the community pharmacy budget, potentially leading to 3,000 closures? Will the Prime Minister express her support for community pharmacies and have another look at this divisive, corrosive and destructive proposal?

The Prime Minister: Everybody in this House recognises the role and contribution of community pharmacies up and down the country, but it is also right that we look at how we are spending NHS money. That is why the Government are looking carefully at this whole issue. If the hon. Gentleman supports community pharmacies, perhaps he ought to have a word with the Leader of the Opposition, because his right hon. Friend’s policy is to nationalise the health service completely, lock, stock and barrel—GP surgeries, Macmillan nurses and community pharmacies.

Q11. [906672] Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): May I welcome the fact that next week this Government will finally make a decision on airport capacity in the south-east, which eluded three of my right hon. Friend’s predecessors and will help to boost trade? Does the Prime Minister agree that, on this issue, substance matters more than symbolism, and will she outline to the House her timetable for implementation?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue, and he is absolutely right. This month, the Government will take a decision on the appropriate site for extended airport capacity in the south-east. The subject has been debated, discussed and speculated about for 40 years; this Government will take a decision, but then a formal process has to be undertaken. The Government will identify their preferred site option.
That will go to a statutory consultation, and then the Government will consider the results of that consultation and introduce an airports national planning statement on which the House will vote.

Q6. [906667] Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Does the Prime Minister agree that any move to close the historical barracks at Fort George would be not only a poor military decision after 250 years of service, but a betrayal of the Black Watch and a slap in the face to the highlands?

The Prime Minister: I recognise the strength of the hon. Gentleman’s view. No decisions on Fort George or other locations have been taken and the Ministry of Defence will engage with all parties impacted by any such decisions, including in Scotland.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con): My right hon. Friend has expressed reluctance to submit to the House even broad plans for our negotiations with the EU because of worries that to do so might weaken her Government’s negotiating position. She might have noticed that, this week, one or more Brexiteer members of her Cabinet have been briefing the newspapers copiously on every proposal being put forward in papers to the relevant Cabinet Committee by their colleagues and launching political attacks on Cabinet colleagues who seem to disagree with them. Will she take firm action to stop this process? Does she also agree that the proper approach should involve parliamentary scrutiny of the broad strategy, once her Government have reached agreement on what it should be?

The Prime Minister: The Government are very clear that the vote on 23 June was a vote to ensure that we had control of movement of people from the EU into the UK. Also, we want the best possible access for businesses for trading in goods and services, and for operating within the European market. That is what the Government will be aiming for, and we will be ambitious in that. Parliament will have its say. There are going to be lengthy negotiations over the course of the two years and more, and Parliament will have its say in a whole variety of ways, not least in relation to the great repeal Bill.

Q7. [906668] Maria Eagle (Garston and Halewood) (Lab): Some of my constituents who have had their tax credits suddenly stopped by Concentrix have been accused of being in a relationship with the previous tenants of their homes, even though they have never met them, and in some cases of being in a relationship with members of their own families and told to prove that they are not. This Kafkaesque situation is causing deep distress and hardship among working mothers in my constituency. Is this what the Prime Minister means by being on the side of working people? What is she going to do to put this right?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady raises an issue that is a matter of concern to Members across the House. I am making sure that those who are being assessed are being assessed properly and that the right decisions are being taken. The Department for Work and Pensions is looking at the whole process of what should be done and how those assessments should be undertaken. I hope that she welcomes the fact that this Government have said that those with long-term conditions that are not going to improve will not be put through the regular assessments that they had under her Labour Government.

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): The first nuclear science degree apprenticeship, with apprenticeships with EDF at Hinkley Point and with the Ministry of Defence, has just been launched at Bridgewater and Taunton College. This is at the forefront of the Government’s apprenticeship reform policy. The course combines academic study with practical work experience and it is paid. Does the Prime Minister agree that this is exactly the kind of business-led course that the nation needs if it is to forge ahead?

The Prime Minister: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. I commend Bridgewater and Taunton College for the steps it is taking to work with businesses to ensure that its courses are what business needs. That is exactly what we want to see. We also want a regeneration of our expertise in the nuclear industry.

Q9. [906670] Anne McLaughlin (Glasgow North East) (SNP): The Prime Minister recently celebrated her 60th birthday, but she is not going to retire. That is her choice, but she is denying that same choice to many of my constituents, including women such as Christine from Springburn, who has worked every bit as hard as the Prime Minister, but will now have to work for an extra six years. When will the Prime Minister do the right thing and give the WASPI women their transitional arrangements so that they, too, can make the choices that she enjoys?

The Prime Minister: I am sure that the hon. Lady knows that we have transitional arrangements in place and that action was taken by the Government to ensure that the period of time for the pension age change would be no more than 18 months compared with the previous timetable. For 81% of women affected by the 2011 change, it will be no more than 12 months.

Heidi Allen (South Cambridgeshire) (Con): The employment figures that have come out today are of course fantastic news, but I am wary about the economic volatility that could result from Brexit, with the potential for inflation to rise and the cost of living to go up for people on very modest wages. Does the Prime Minister agree that we need to keep as many people in employment as possible? We have made the right decision on tax credits. May I urge her personally, ahead of the autumn statement, to look at the cuts that are still embedded in universal credit to ensure that she understands what they will do to people who are trying to get into work?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to talk about the importance of getting people into work, which has a benefit not just in terms of families having an income. I am proud of the Conservative Government’s record over the past six years of getting more and more people into work so that hundreds of thousands fewer households now have no work income coming in. That is extremely important. The point of universal credit is to ensure that the transition from benefits into work means that people do see a benefit if they get into the workplace. The previous system meant that some people
said that they were better off on benefits. We want to see people in work and that is what the system is there to encourage.

Q10. [906673] Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I have been asking questions for 15 months about this Tory Government’s appalling two-child policy and rape clause, but the Government still do not know how it will work. From one feminist to another, can the Prime Minister tell me how she justifies putting vulnerable women through the trauma of proving that their third child was born as the result of rape?

The Prime Minister: We have been clear that women who have a third child as a result of rape would not be subject to the limit that is being considered in relation to benefits. I absolutely recognise that the hon. Lady’s point addresses concern about dealing with individuals who have been through the trauma of rape, and that is why the Government are taking their time to consider that. We are consulting at the moment and looking at how to ensure that we do this in absolutely the right way.

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): Given the increasing relevance of the Commonwealth for trade, will the Prime Minister give her personal support to the first ever meeting of Commonwealth Trade Ministers here in the UK next year? When she goes to India next month, will she commit to persuade Prime Minister Modi to attend the 2018 Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in the UK?

The Prime Minister: I am happy to encourage all leaders to attend CHOGM when it takes place here in the United Kingdom. I assure my right hon. Friend that we are indeed looking at the possibility of trade deals in relation to the Commonwealth. I applaud that first ever meeting of Commonwealth Trade Ministers, which is an important step as we look to forge a new global role in the world, ensuring that we make a success of leaving the EU and trading our way around the world.

Q11. [906674] Robert Flello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): The pottery industry is witnessing a modest renaissance in the ceramics industry that the hon. Gentleman refers to. His constituency, of course, has a long-standing history of and tradition in ceramics. What are we doing? As we go through the negotiations for leaving the European Union, we will be ensuring that

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises a matter that was one of the first issues that my right hon. Friend the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice raised with me: violence and safety in prisons. That is why my right hon. Friend is looking across the board at the action that needs to be taken. She has already announced extra money for more staff in prisons and recognises the importance of this particular issue.

Q12. [906675] Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Just one in every 1,000 pupils is a child on free school meals in a grammar school. Does the Prime Minister agree that that tiny number is a flimsy evidence base on which to create a new national schools policy? Would it not be better for her to look at the real evidence base and at how to reduce inequality in education?

The Prime Minister: I want to see every child getting the education that is right for them. I want every child to be able to get on as far as their talents and hard work will take them. That is why we need to increase the number of good schools in this country. If we look at the gap in attainment in grammar schools between those who are from disadvantaged backgrounds and those who are not, we see that it is virtually zero—that is the not the same in other schools. I just say to the hon. Lady that it is wrong that we have a system in this country where a law prevents the opening or expansion of good schools. That is what we are going to get rid of.

Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Will the Prime Minister work with her Ministers and Secretaries of State to champion a reduction in the ivory trade and in the trade in the organs of endangered species throughout the world so that this country tries to lead by example?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. This is something the Government have been taking up, and I can assure her that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has not only heard her representations, but promoted this as an issue that the Government will take up.

Q14. [906676] Robert Flello (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): The pottery industry is witnessing a modest renaissance, in part through EU exports and EU action on Chinese ceramic dumping. The previous Prime Minister said that he would make sure that the ceramic industry’s voice is heard and that we would get a good negotiation. What is this Prime Minister doing to ensure that Stoke-on-Trent’s ceramic manufacturers maintain both tariff-free access to the EU and a level playing field in the face of protectionist dumping?

The Prime Minister: I am very pleased to welcome the renaissance in the ceramics industry that the hon. Gentleman refers to. His constituency, of course, has her full support in commissioning an immediate, thorough and complete review of the operation, management, capacity, leadership and resourcing of the National Offender Management Service, which has singularly failed to arrest this declining situation?
this country has the best possible access to trade with and operate within that European market. That is what people want and that is what we will deliver.

Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): Many constituents have contacted me to express concern about anti-Semitism. I am sure that every Member of this House can agree that we should show zero tolerance of anti-Semitism, but does the Prime Minister also agree that we must ensure that all parties do not allow a situation to arise in which it appears that an environment is created where anti-Semitism is tolerated?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that this House should send a very clear message that we will not tolerate anti-Semitism. I have been concerned about the rise in the number of incidents of anti-Semitism in this country. We should very clearly ensure that those incidents of anti-Semitism are properly investigated and dealt with, and that we give the clear message that we will not tolerate it. But that does have to be done by every single political party in this Chamber, and I say to the Leader of the Opposition that given the report of the Home Affairs Committee about anti-Semitism and the approach to anti-Semitism in the Labour party, he needs to think very carefully about the environment that has been created in the Labour party in relation to anti-Semitism.

Andy Burnham (Leigh) (Lab): We are now just one month from the start of the new inquest into the Birmingham pub bombings. West Midlands police has set aside for itself a legal fund of £1 million, but as of today, the bereaved families have no legal funding. Prime Minister, this is a shameful state of affairs. Please intervene and show the Birmingham families the same compassion as was shown to the Hillsborough families.

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman might be aware that the Birmingham families have been encouraged to apply—I believe they have applied—to the legal aid fund for exceptional funding. That was, as I understand it, what happened after the 7/7 bombings. The Home Secretary has made clear her expectation that funding will be provided. We are waiting for the decision from the legal aid fund, and we are hopeful that it will be a positive one.

Mrs Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): Why attempt to build a new runway at Heathrow when we could deliver one at Gatwick in half the time, for half the cost and with a fraction of the environmental impact?

The Prime Minister: I assure my right hon. Friend that no decision has been taken on the site of airport expansion in the south-east. As she will know from her previous background, the Davies commission said that airport capacity in the south-east should be expanded and the Government accepted that argument. The Davies commission identified three sites, all of which it said would be credible and deliverable, and the Government will take a decision this month.

Mr Speaker: It is fitting that we finish with a question from Mr Gerald Jones.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): May I thank the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and other Members for their comments about the Aberfan disaster, and about the resilience and quiet dignity shown by the people of Aberfan? At 9.15 on Friday morning—the anniversary of the disaster—the people in that community and communities across Wales will mark the disaster with a minute’s silence. As the disaster affected communities right across the country, if not the world, will the Prime Minister support that minute’s silence being marked across the UK as well?

The Prime Minister: I know that the Secretary of State for Wales will be attending the memorial that will take place in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency on Friday. It is appropriate that we all show our respect for those who lost their lives and for the families who suffered as a result of the Aberfan tragedy 50 years ago. As we said earlier, it was a terrible tragedy not just for individual families, but for a whole community, and it is right that we recognise that and mark it.
The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Simon Kirby): This Government have taken a great step forward in giving more and more people freedom to choose how they use their pension savings when they retire. We have already seen more than 300,000 people choosing to access their pension flexibly since the reforms were introduced. Alongside our efforts to do that, we also said that we would look at how we could spread that flexibility to people locked into existing annuities. We consulted extensively with the industry and with consumer groups to explore whether we could put in place the right conditions for a market to develop to facilitate that idea.

Throughout our investigations, one of our very highest priorities was to establish whether people could get a good deal through such a market. In the course of our efforts to investigate the viability of a secondary market in annuities, two things became clear. First, without compromising on consumer protections there would be insufficient purchasers of these annuities to create a competitive market in which British pensioners could get a good deal. Secondly, pensioners trying to sell their annuities would also be likely to incur high costs in doing so.

This Government have made it very clear that we want this to be a country that works for everyone, and that includes making sure that everyone gets a high level of consumer protection. It has become clear, through our extensive research, that a secondary market would not be able to offer this. Rather than being to the benefit of British pensioners, it would instead be to their detriment. It is for that reason that we are not prepared to allow such a market to develop, and we will not be taking this policy further.

Greg Mulholland: No disrespect to the Minister, whom I like, but the Chancellor should have been here to answer this question, particularly given the disgraceful way in which the announcement was made.

The move towards pension freedoms was the flagship announcement in the Budget just two years ago, in 2014. Originally the brainchild of the former Liberal Democrat Pensions Minister Steve Webb, it was embraced by the former Chancellor and specifically included in the manifesto on which this Government were elected. Yet yesterday afternoon, the Government announced via the press, not via this House, that they were scrapping the whole deal. This is a huge U-turn, which was announced after clear lobbying by an industry that never really subscribed to it, and a failure by the Government to build a reasonable secondary annuity market. Of course it is right that protections are put in place to ensure that people are not exploited on the secondary annuities market, but there are tens of thousands of people trapped in poor-value annuities who are eager to be able to take advantage of the new freedoms. Based on the promises in this Government’s manifesto, many of them will already have been considering how to take advantage of the plans in order to release themselves from their annuity and invest their savings differently. This announcement will leave many people having to make different decisions about their retirement from those to which they were being directed—if, that is, they have even heard of the change, given the way that it was rushed through and the way it was announced by the Government.

Can the Minister say, first, when the decision was made to drop the new pension freedom plans? Secondly, why was this decision not announced to Parliament before it was announced to the media? Thirdly, what are the Government doing to inform those who may wish to cash in their annuity that they will no longer be able to do so? Fourthly, what assessment have the Government made of people’s change of behaviour in response to the freedom, and how will this affect their financial decisions?

The pensions freedom plan was about trusting people with their money. Clearly, this Government have decided that they no longer trust people. They owe an apology to those who have spent time and money examining their options for retirement, and I hope we get one today.

Simon Kirby: It is easy to wish to have the cake and eat it, as the Lib Dems regularly do. It is difficult being a Minister. Sometimes we have to make hard decisions, but on balance, the interests of the consumers, often older people and the most vulnerable in our society, have trumped the desire to further increase pensions flexibility. The hon. Gentleman is disingenuous. It was one element of our pension freedoms and, after extensive consultation, it transpired that it would not provide value for money. Which?, which is totally independent of Government, has said that “it would have been wrong to move forward without assurances that consumers could get value for money and have the necessary protections”—assurances and necessary protections protecting those most vulnerable people in our society.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I did not interrupt the Minister in his flow, but may I ask that from now on we avoid the use of the word “disingenuous” or “disingenuously”? There is an imputation of dishonour and we should avoid that. The Minister is a dextrous fellow with, I am sure, an extensive vocabulary and he can deploy some other term to get his point across. On the subject of those with dexterity and great vocabulary, I call Sir Desmond Swayne.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): It is the right decision for the circumstances, but does my hon. Friend think that there is any connection between poor value in the annuities market and the Bank of England’s monetary policy?

Simon Kirby: Mr Speaker, I acknowledge your sound advice, as ever, and apologise if I have been anything other than my usually well-behaved self.
My right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) raises an interesting point, but this is about people, many of whom are older and more vulnerable, making the right choices, and the Government making sure that the market is there to support them. That is not the case, which is why we have changed tack.

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): This is the latest of the many U-turns that the Government have made. I thank the hon. Member for Leeds North West (Greg Mulholland) for securing this urgent question. Labour Members want to know why the Government did not do proper market analysis prior to the announcement. They were warned at the time. If they had done that analysis at the outset, they may have realised the chaos and confusion that such an announcement would cause for up to 500,000 pensioners across the country, who are already worried about their long-term future.

This U-turn on pensions comes in the same week as the Government have pushed forward with their proposals for a lifetime ISA, despite widespread cross-party concern about the impact of future public finances on personal retirement plans. In the UK pension market the consumer is unable to make an informed choice because of a lack of cost and performance data. We believe that it should be the role of the Government to provide those data. What will the Government do to assist with that process?

Like the hon. Member for Leeds North West, we would like to know when the Government decided to abandon the policy. Who made the final decision? Was there any interference by the Prime Minister in the previous Chancellor’s decisions? Who was consulted? How extensive was that consultation? The Government were warned. What assessment has been made of the pension market in general and the knock-on effects of this decision? What influence, if any, has the recent vote for Britain to leave the European Union had on this decision? There is an indication that because of this decision, £900 million may be lost in the first two years in tax that would have come in as a result of people paying tax on the sale of their annuity. Where is that money going to come from? Is that not another black hole in the Government’s finances?

Simon Kirby: Let me deal with the points in reverse. The hon. Gentleman will have to wait for the autumn statement to see what the finances look like, but it became increasingly apparent that not only was it not a good deal for consumers—those vulnerable people who we care about—but it was unlikely to provide the kind of income that had first been expected. We consulted extensively with the industry and consumer groups. I had many conversations with the Department for Work and Pensions, and particularly with the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Pensions. The hon. Gentleman asks where information will be provided. The Government are introducing a new money advice service that will provide such information.

I shall finish with a quote from the Association of British Insurers, in whose interest the hon. Gentleman might suppose it was for us to continue with the policy.

Simon Kirby: As ever, my hon. Friend makes an excellent point. There were very few people interested in buying those products, which would have resulted in a very poor deal for customers. The market was not big enough to provide value for money and on that basis we decided not to proceed.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): On that point, given that we now know that there was an absence of buyers in the market, where was the Government’s consultation before they offered their proposal? We cannot get away from the fact that this was a manifesto commitment from the Government. I welcome the U-turn; they have done the right thing, but why was the matter not brought to the House? Why did we read about it in the media?

Last April the Financial Conduct Authority said that there were concerns about the secondary market in annuities, which would mean “a significant risk of poor outcomes for consumers”. The regulator said:

“Annuities are inherently difficult for consumers to value, and consumers who will be able to participate in this market will include a higher proportion of older, more vulnerable consumers.”

We could see that. The FCA came out with that last April. Why has it taken so long for the Government to do the right thing? We recognise some of the concerns for consumers as a result of the pensions freedoms introduced. May we have a full review of the pensions freedom policy?

Simon Kirby: I thank the hon. Gentleman for recognising that this is the right thing to do. It is a difficult decision and it is, as ever, a balance between two conflicting viewpoints. My job as a Minister at the Treasury is about making sure that consumers are protected, that industries are regulated sufficiently, and that there is the very best possible deal for customers. Withdrawing this product, which is aimed at many old and vulnerable consumers, is absolutely the right thing to do.

Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): I know that the Minister has very bravely taken this decision to protect the more vulnerable pensioners who are suffering, but what will he and the Treasury be able to do to ensure that pensioners on very low incomes who are trapped in difficult annuities can escape those punishing regimes?

Simon Kirby: We are looking at an economy that works for everyone, including those pensioners on low incomes. The Treasury will be considering this very carefully, but my hon. Friend will have to wait until the autumn statement to hear how we are best placed to
deal with this. However, those people are absolutely at the centre of our attention, and we will do all we can to help.

Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (Lab/Co-op): Of course, guarding against mis-selling is important, but does this announcement not represent two new problems? It is a problem, first, for those hundreds of thousands of pensioners who have been marched up the hill only to be marched back down again, and left uncertain about their financial options, but, secondly, for those other generations of potential savers who are baffled by pensions generally and who will find this mixed message—this chopping and changing—on flexibilities even more of a reason to feel sour towards the attractiveness of pensions? We have a savings crisis in this country, and the Government need far more consistency and a clearer policy.

Simon Kirby: None of us wants to see people being baffled, and none of us wants to see uncertainty, but at the end of the day we are surely better off making the right decision, which protects vulnerable consumers, rather than carrying on regardless. The hon. Gentleman is right that we all have a responsibility to educate and inform people throughout their lives about the importance of savings and pensions, and that is something the Government fully intend to continue doing.

David Rutley (Macclesfield) (Con): I know that this is a difficult decision for my hon. Friend, because he feels passionately about pension freedoms. Can he assure the House, though, that every effort is now being made to ensure that pension providers fully co-operate with all other aspects of the Government’s wider pension freedoms, which have been so warmly welcomed around the country?

Simon Kirby: I can give my hon. Friend the reassurance that I will do all I can to make sure that providers work closely with the Government to get the best possible deal for older people and indeed savers, including younger people—people who are perhaps not in the habit of saving or contributing to pensions. That is an important thing, and I am happy to pursue it with my full vigour.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I will ask the Minister a third time why this announcement was not made to Parliament before it was made to the media. Also, what is he going to do to inform people who may have intended to cash in their annuity, but who are now not going to be able to do so?

Simon Kirby: It is fair to say that there are often circumstances where information or announcements are market sensitive, and sometimes that drives how things are announced.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Given that these retirement annuities can form the bedrock of many people’s financial security, it is right that a decision is taken to secure the interests of those people rather than to press ahead purely because of a manifesto commitment. Will the Minister reassure me, though, about what work the Treasury is doing to ensure that people get a better deal on their annuities in the first place? For many people, looking to cash in their annuity in was about trying to deal with the bad deal they got on that annuity, not necessarily about wanting a lump sum.

Simon Kirby: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: two wrongs, sadly, do not make a right. The Government are committed to giving people pension freedoms so that they can choose what to do with their money, because that is the right choice to make, but, in this particular and individual circumstance, it was not the appropriate way forward.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): My constituent, Mr Anderson, contacted me and advised me that, despite the risks, he planned to take up the option of selling his annuity. I wrote to the Treasury and was assured only 19 days ago:

“The Government remains committed to delivering these proposals”.

Yesterday’s announcement is a betrayal of people such as Mr Anderson. I notice that the Minister did not answer the question a few minutes ago, so what exactly do the Government suggest that Mr Anderson and others do now?

Simon Kirby: Obviously, Mr Anderson is as important as all the other people who, no doubt, will be very interested in this announcement. It transpired through consultation that a very small percentage of people would be better off. We were looking at legislation that would oblige the Government to provide guidance and advice; in the vast—very vast—majority of cases, that advice would be that it would not be appropriate and in the consumer’s best interests to proceed. There is no easy answer, but at the end of the day, I am not going to allow vulnerable older people to take advantage of what may, superficially, seem a good deal, but what, in the long term, is a poor one.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): John Lawson, the head of retirement policy at Aviva, has said that one of the obstacles in the way of the secondary annuities market is the existence of statutory override clauses in annuity contracts. Has that played any part in the Government’s decision, and do they have any plans to at least look at passing legislation to deal with that?

Simon Kirby: That is certainly something we will be looking at. At the end of the day, many people got a poor deal on the way in; the last thing I want to do is to give them a doubly poor deal on the way out because the market is not big enough to provide value for money. If that means the option of reducing regulation, I am not a fan of that; regulation exists to support people and to help them make the right decisions.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The industry opposed this; millions of pensioners who were locked into low-paying annuities supported it. The Chancellor at the time knew all the problems, yet he claimed to be the champion of choice for the people. What has changed? Do the Government now believe that the nature of people they said would make good choices because they were sensible and had good advice has changed? Given that the Minister has removed choice, but not the problem, what does he intend to do for those who still find themselves locked in annuity arrangements that do not give them a sensible and fair income?

Simon Kirby: It is fair to say that the Chancellor of the Exchequer at the time was in possession of all the information following the consultation. It was our
intent, clearly, at the time to listen carefully to not only the industry but consumer groups, which we have done extensively. It is worth saying that we remain absolutely committed to all the other pension freedoms that we are introducing. This is a sensible way forward, and I hope the hon. Gentleman welcomes it.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): This pop-up policy, which has now been popped down again, came from a Government who had a long-term economic plan, yet this policy has not survived very long. As has been indicated, the policy was a response to the bubbling sense of scandal that was there because people were stuck with meagre and marginal annuities, and it was a chance to give them something different. If the Minister is convinced that he is avoiding the new scandal that would have happened, of people ending up mis-selling their annuities, what is he doing about the original scandal of the meagre annuities that people are trapped in, which this policy was designed to respond to?

Simon Kirby: The hon. Gentleman is right in as far as that certainly was the intention of the policy. There is a long-term plan, because I am concerned about the long-term financial wellbeing of these older and vulnerable people, and it is important that they get the right deal and make the right decisions. That is why this suggestion, which is only one of many, is not appropriate to carry forward. It is not a pop-up policy; we have listened carefully, and we have made the right decision.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): This U-turn has come about because of concerns about mis-selling and protecting consumers. The same risks and concerns must surely apply to the people who are currently exercising pension freedoms by cashing in their pension policies for lump sums. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) said, when are this Government going to have a coherent review of the existing pension freedoms legislation?

Simon Kirby: What happens in the secondary annuities market is very different from cashing in existing pensions for lump sums. To be clear to the House, selling an annuity would never have been the same as getting a refund on all the money that was put into the product or the original pension pot minus any payments made. Purchasers would have paid what they thought the income stream was worth. Without a competitive market, that income stream would have represented poor value for money, and people would have got a very poor settlement as a result.
Point of Order

1.10 pm

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Yesterday at Foreign Office questions, the shadow Foreign Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), asked the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Mr Ellwood):

“When can we expect full, independent, UN-led investigations of the thousands of airstrikes on civilian targets in Yemen?”

In his reply, the Minister stated:

“There are not thousands, as the hon. Lady suggested—that is to mislead the House—but there are a number with which we are concerned that need to be clarified.”—[Official Report, 18 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 667-668.]

However, I have discovered that on 16 September The Guardian newspaper stated that the independent Yemen data project “records more than 8,600 air attacks between March 2015, when the Saudi-led campaign began, and the end of August this year.” Moreover, Human Rights Watch lists dozens of airstrikes that have appeared to be “unlawfully indiscriminate” and have caused civilian casualties. Can you advise the House on whether the Minister needs to come to the Chamber and correct the inaccurate and rather dismissive reply that he gave to my hon. Friend yesterday?

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me notice that he intended to raise this point of order. What Members say in this House—I often have to make this point, but it bears repetition—is their individual responsibility. This applies to Ministers, and indeed to Opposition Front Benchers, as it does to other right hon. and hon. Members. The hon. Gentleman believes that Ministers have been inaccurate in what they said yesterday—or, specifically, that the response to the shadow Foreign Secretary was inaccurate. He has made that view clear, and he has done so on the record. I am sure that it will have been heard by those on the Treasury Bench, and that it will be relayed to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. I am also sure that if the Foreign Secretary and the Minister feel that the House has been inadvertently misled, the relevant Minister will take swift steps to correct the record. It is only fair to say, as it is not for me to umpire on whether a clarification is required, that a Minister may take a view of the facts of the matter that differs from that of the hon. Gentleman. As to whether that is the case, we will have to await events.

Cosmetic Surgery (Standards of Practice)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

1.13 pm

Mr Kevan Jones (North Durham) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about the training, qualifications and certification of medical practitioners conducting cosmetic surgical procedures; to establish a code of practice for the provision of information to patients on the options and risks in relation to such procedures; to make provision about permissible treatments and the advertising of such treatments; and for connected purposes.

I became aware of the scandal around the £3.5 billion-a-year cosmetic surgery industry through a constituent, Dawn Knight, who in 2012 had cosmetic surgery on her eyes at Dolan Park hospital, run by Hospital Medical Group. The surgery was sold to her with a lifetime aftercare package to take care of any complications arising from the procedure. Following the surgery, Dawn was unable to close her eyes, and still, to this day, has to apply artificial tears to her eyes every two hours to stop them drying out. Dawn saw the surgeon who undertook the procedure, Arnaldo Paganelli, who refused to admit there was a problem. When she contacted Hospital Medical Group about the aftercare package, it simply pointed out a clause in her contract that said that treatments could be undertaken only if the surgeon agreed to it. No further help was offered, making a complete sham of the aftercare plan she was sold. As in similar cases, the NHS is now having to pick up the bill for Dawn’s ongoing care. Dawn’s case is not an isolated one. Many others have come forward since the publicity around it.

Although Hospital Medical Group promotes itself as a cosmetic surgery company, along with its associated companies, it is nothing of the sort. Rather, it is a facilities management company, simply providing the facilities where surgery takes place and marketing the procedures. When Dawn complained, she found out that her contract was not with Hospital Medical Group but with the surgeon who performed the procedure, and was told that it was her responsibility to check his General Medical Council registration and insurance. In Dawn’s case, her surgeon was a bankrupt, under-insured individual who was based in Italy and flew into the UK to work for Hospital Medical Group.

Herein lies the problem: at present, cosmetic surgery is not a defined surgical speciality in its own right. As the Department of Health has noted, the training within certain defined specialities such as plastic surgery, ear, nose and throat surgery, and eye surgery includes an aspect of cosmetic training, but no qualification is available for those who perform cosmetic surgery. In fact, the law allows any qualified doctor—they need not even be a surgeon—to perform cosmetic surgery without undertaking additional training or qualifications. My Bill aims to close this loophole. It has the support of the Royal College of Surgeons.

The Government and the Department of Health are aware of this situation. Following the PIP breast implant scandal, the Government asked Professor Sir Bruce Keogh, the then NHS medical director, to undertake a
review of the regulation of cosmetic interventions. That review was published in April 2013. It asked the Royal College of Surgeons to establish a cosmetic surgery inter-speciality committee to set standards for cosmetic surgery practice and training, and to make arrangements for formal certification of all surgeons regarded as competent to undertake cosmetic procedures, taking into account their training and experience.

The Department of Health requested the Law Commission to draft legislation, and this was done in 2014. The legislation was widely supported, but the coalition Government failed to enact it, as have the current Government. The Royal College of Surgeons would like only surgeons with appropriate skills and experience to undertake cosmetic surgery. I strongly support that, and I think that most members of the public would do so. To facilitate this, the GMC needs to be given legal powers to formally recognise additional qualifications or accreditations such as those that the Royal College of Surgeons is developing in cosmetic surgery. It should then be mandatory for those offering cosmetic surgery not only to have these but to make it clear to the public that they have them when advertising their services.

This is not the first time I have spoken about this case; I raised it in the House on 20 October 2015. I would like to put on record my thanks to the right hon. Member for Ipswich (Ben Gummer), the then Health Minister, who met me and my constituent, Dawn Knight.

Another area that the Bill aims to address is the marketing of cosmetic procedures. Some of the techniques that are used would be more appropriate for selling double glazing than cosmetic surgery, with its related risks. They include two-for-one offers, along with glossy brochures with no explanation of the potential risks of undertaking the surgery. The whole thrust of the advertising is to sell such procedures without any counselling or advice on whether it is appropriate for an individual to undergo them. Individuals who have already undergone surgery are often bombarded with more adverts, by email or on Facebook, despite the fact that that practice has been reported to the Advertising Standards Agency. Such aggressive marketing needs to be banned and a mandatory cooling-off period introduced once people have signed up to allow them to change their minds. I would go further and include mandatory counselling for individuals before they undertake any such procedure.

I want to address the way in which the companies that sell cosmetic surgery are structured. Dawn Knight responded to an advert from the Hospital Group, but her contract was with a company called the Hospital Medical Group Ltd. If we look at the Companies House register, we see that under the main Hospital Group holding there are eight different companies. In 2012-13, the group’s turnover was £44 million and dividends of some £7.5 million were paid to its directors. In 2016, the Hospital Medical Group was liquidated and its assets were sold to one of its parent companies. Some 80% of creditors on the liquidator’s list are solicitors representing former clients. One suspects that that structure was put in place to avoid any potential for former clients to sue the company for negligence.

With the liquidation, the lifetime guarantee that Dawn was sold is, like those sold to many other people, now completely worthless. Regulation is needed to ensure that guarantees offered on cosmetic surgery can actually be used to get redress. Despite the fact that a large number of women now have no recourse to law, the Hospital Group continues to operate and sell its products. The continuing care of individuals such as Dawn is falling on the NHS, while the group and its associated companies continue to make a profit. Guarantees must be backed up by insurance, so that if a company is liquidated, people can get legal redress.

The Prime Minister, in her speech to Conservative Party conference, said that the state should intervene where the market fails. We have here a classic example of the market not only failing but being used to exploit people, which is ruining their lives and costing the NHS millions of pounds a year. The Government are aware that action is needed in this area, and there is no reason why they should not act.
Opposition Day  
[9th Allotted Day]  
Rights of EU Nationals

1.23 pm  
Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I beg to move,  

That this House recognises the contribution that nationals from other countries in the EU have made to the UK; and calls on the Government to ensure that all nationals from other countries in the EU who have made the UK their home retain their current rights, including the rights to live and work in the UK, should the UK exit the EU.

It is nearly four months since the EU referendum, and the long-term status of non-UK EU nationals living in the United Kingdom is still unclear, just as the Government are still without a plan or a negotiating strategy for the Brexit that they accidentally delivered. The status of millions of our fellow workers, friends and neighbours is uncertain. That is simply not good enough. Despite repeated requests, the Government have refused to guarantee, in the long term, the rights of EU nationals who have made their home in the United Kingdom. In the meantime, in England and Wales hate crime has soared and xenophobic rhetoric is common in the mainstream media and, sadly, sometimes in the mouths of Ministers.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I thought that the Government had clearly said that they had no wish to make anybody leave unless there were evictions from the continent. Is the hon. and learned Lady saying that continental countries are going to evict British citizens?

Joanna Cherry: The whole point of this motion is that human beings should not be used as bargaining chips in negotiation. If the right hon. Gentleman and his colleagues think that the United Kingdom has so much to offer the European Union in its negotiations, why do they insist on using human beings as bargaining chips?

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): Does the hon. and learned Lady agree that many of the people we are talking about provide vital services and work in our public services? For instance, 6% of doctors working in the Welsh health service come from the EU. We face a crisis in that a third of our doctors may retire in the next few years, so we will need those people and additional qualified individuals to work in our health service. If the Government’s rhetoric is translated into policy, it will have a detrimental impact on the delivery of health services in my country.

Joanna Cherry: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. The statistics are very similar in Scotland, where about 6.7% of staff in the NHS are EU nationals. The net result of the refusal to guarantee the long-term status of EU nationals, and of the xenophobic rhetoric and hate crime across the United Kingdom, is that many EU nationals are living with considerable stress and worry. We all receive letters from them as their constituency MPs. Damage has been done to the British economy and, importantly, to our international reputation.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): My hon. and learned Friend will undoubtedly have read the disgraceful comments in some quarters of the press this morning by a Tory MP who suggested that some child refugees should have to undergo dental checks to confirm their age before gaining passage to the UK from Calais—as if those children had not been through enough. Leaving aside the fact that those children have a legal right to family reunification here—

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. [ Interruption. ]

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) will resume his seat. We will be with him in a moment. There is a point of order from Mr David T.C. Davies.

David T. C. Davies: I am the Conservative MP who has just been referred to. This is not a matter that is before us today. I wanted to speak about EU migrants, being married to one myself. If the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Gray) wants to raise a completely unrelated matter, will I be able to answer that in the speech that I hope you will call me to make later on, Mr Speaker, even though it has nothing to do with this debate?

Mr Speaker: I did not judge the remark to be disorderly, although it needs to be made briefly. I did not do not think it was disorderly, but I give the hon. Member for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) the assurance, which he is entitled to seek, that he will have an opportunity in his remarks to respond as he thinks fit. No one should deny him that opportunity. Briefly, Mr Gray; let us hear it.

Neil Gray: Does my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) agree that such disgraceful, xenophobic rhetoric is unhelpfully fuelling the xenophobic attacks that we have seen across the country since the Brexit vote?

Joanna Cherry: I very much agree with my hon. Friend. It is incumbent on all of us in public life to be mindful of the language we use, particularly when we are talking about refugees who are children—the definition of a child being someone under the age of 18.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con) rose—

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con) rose—

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con) rose—

Joanna Cherry: I will make some progress. Those of us who have actually been to Calais, met some of these child refugees—some of them are young men, but they are still children—and seen them separated from their families and in tears found the comments to which my hon. Friend referred deeply distasteful.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): Will the hon. and learned Lady give way?

Joanna Cherry: I am going to make some progress.
Tomorrow, the Prime Minister will attend her first European Union summit in Brussels. I very much hope that it will not be her last. Britain’s position on EU migrants will be a central issue. Now is the opportunity for the UK Government to do the right thing, so the Scottish National party calls on this House today to recognise the contribution that EU nationals have made to the UK. We also call on the Government to ensure that all EU nationals who have made this country their home retain their current rights, including the rights to live and work in this country, should the UK exit the European Union.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I asked the Home Secretary how an EU citizen demonstrates that they have lived in the UK for five or more years, what citizenship they will be able to claim, what certification of these rights will be provided and what the estimate is of the costs of going through this process. In reply to that parliamentary question, I was told:

“The Home Office has indicated that it will not be possible to answer this question within the usual time period.”

Is it not time we got our act together as a country and gave people who have given their lives and their taxes to this country the security of knowing that they can remain?

Mr Speaker: Order. These are all very serious and worthy interventions, but they suffer from the disadvantage of being too long. This must not continue. We must try to restore some sort of order to this debate. I do not want to embarrass him unduly, but if Members would model themselves in terms of brevity on the right hon. Member for Wokingham (John Redwood)—or on the model themselves in terms of brevity on the right hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon). Is this not symptomatic of the complete failure of various Departments to answer any questions arising from the strategy they will presumably need to adopt as a result of the result on 24 June?

Joanna Cherry: I could not agree more with the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon). Is this not symptomatic of the complete failure of various Departments to answer any questions arising from the strategy they will presumably need to adopt as a result of the result on 24 June?

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Mr Harper: Will the hon. and learned Lady give way?

Joanna Cherry: I will give way in a moment.

To pick up on the hon. Lady’s point, I am delighted that Scottish National party Members have the full support of Labour party colleagues for the motion. We are happy to work with them as part of a cross-party, progressive alliance, which I am sure will include some Government Members, to protect the rights of EU nationals across the UK.

Several hon. Members rose—

Joanna Cherry: I am spilt for choice, but I will take an intervention from the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper).

Mr Harper: Briefly, I completely agree with the first part of the hon. and learned Lady’s motion, which I have read very carefully, in which she recognises the contribution made by EU nationals, but does she not accept that the first responsibility of the Minister for Immigration and the Prime Minister is to British citizens, more than 1 million of whom are in European Union countries? Their rights must be protected, but her motion is silent on their interests.

Joanna Cherry: It is of course open to the right hon. Gentleman to bring forward such a motion. This motion is about protecting the rights of EU nationals in the United Kingdom, which the United Kingdom Government are in a position to do.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): My husband is a UK citizen based in Germany, where he runs a very small business. He was horrified by the tone of his Government in looking after his rights as a person who is working and has established himself abroad. He said to me, “Do they not understand that threatening Europe is not the best way to open negotiations?” I merely said, “No, they don’t.”

Joanna Cherry: I could not agree more with the hon. Lady. As I have said, if, as we are constantly told by the Brexiteers, having trade agreements with Britain is such a fantastic option for the other 27 member states of the European Union, why must the Government keep individuals up their sleeve as bargaining chips?

Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): I note in passing that if the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) wanted to make his point, he could have tabled an amendment, but he chose not to do so. Is not the right thing to look after our own communities, and EU nationals are essential to the functioning of many businesses and services in our communities?

Joanna Cherry: Absolutely. I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. The purpose of the motion is to make sure that we do not get into the very unfortunate position of having people living, working and paying taxes in the United Kingdom who have lesser rights and status than others. That would be deeply invidious and, if I may say so as a Scottish nationalist, I would have thought it was contrary to the British tradition.

Sir Desmond Swayne: Equally, there will be British citizens working abroad whom we do not want to suffer from having any lesser rights. Would the hon. and learned Lady go into the negotiating chamber armed only with the glow of the good will and the moral high ground as against the hard-headedness of her interlocutors in the negotiations?

Joanna Cherry: I am very happy and proud to say that I and my Scottish National party colleagues would never go into the negotiating chamber using individual human beings as bargaining chips.

Several hon. Members rose—

Joanna Cherry: I am going to make a little progress, and I will then give way.

I use the phrase “bargaining chips” advisedly, because it is a source of shame to this House and to the United Kingdom that the Prime Minister and several of her Ministers—including the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union and, I am particularly ashamed to
say, the Secretary of State for Scotland—have hinted at using EU nationals living in this country as bargaining chips. Indeed, at the Conservative party conference, which we all so much enjoyed watching on television, the Secretary of State for International Trade went so far as even to compare European Union nationals with “cards” in a game.

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill): The hon. and learned Lady is talking about European Union citizens being used as bargaining chips. Does she recall that in 2014 Nicola Sturgeon threatened to strip EU nationals of their right to remain in an independent Scotland? As reported in The Scotsman newspaper, she said:

“There are 160,000 EU nationals from other states living in Scotland, including some in the Commonwealth Games city of Glasgow. If Scotland was outside Europe, they would lose the right to stay here.”

Who is being used as bargaining chips there?

Joanna Cherry: May I in the gentlest and friendliest way counsel the hon. Gentleman against taking advice, first, from the Conservative party in Scotland, and secondly, from The Scotsman newspaper, which is frankly not what it was when I was a girl?

Several hon. Members rose—

Joanna Cherry: I will just finish responding on that point.

There is absolutely no question that the First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, or her distinguished predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond), ever threatened EU nationals with not being part of Scottish society. Our policy has been clear for many, many years: we want an independent Scotland in the European Union, with equal rights for all living in Scotland. We are quite clear on that. This debate is about making the UK Government be clear about having equal rights for all across the United Kingdom.

Charlie Elphicke: I have listened to the hon. and learned Lady’s speech with care. She has been pressed time and again to say whether she would defend the rights of citizens of this nation who are living abroad, and time and again she has refused to do so. I will give her one more opportunity. Would she stand up for Britain and British citizens and their rights around the globe?

Joanna Cherry: Yes, of course I would, but I am not going to be sidetracked on an issue that is not the subject of this debate. If the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues were so agitated about this aspect of the argument, they were free to table an amendment, as my hon. Friend the Member for Angus (Mike Weir) said. I am delighted to hear that they are so concerned about the welfare of British citizens in Europe, which has been put at risk by the Brexit vote, but I would like them to extend the same concern to EU nationals living in the United Kingdom. That is what the motion is about, and no amount of obfuscation from Government Members is going to sidetrack me.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Does my hon. and learned Friend not agree that we can negotiate in two ways—positively or negatively? If, on 24 June, we had graciously said that everyone who has settled here can live here, that approach would have been returned. When I met the German ambassador, he had not occurred to the Germans to throw out British citizens. That idea has arisen only because we are threatening their citizens.

Joanna Cherry: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Con) rose—

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab) rose—

Mr Goodwill rose—

Joanna Cherry: I am now going to try to make some progress, as I have taken a lot of interventions. I will be very happy to put Government Members right on a few points later, but at this stage I want to make some progress.

We would not expect the 1.2 million UK citizens who live in other EU countries to be treated as bargaining chips, and we would not expect the Governments of other EU countries to preside over a shocking rise in xenophobic hate crime, so the UK Government must accept their share of responsibility for what is going on in this country at the moment and stop fuelling division.

Mr Clarke: I entirely share the hon. and learned Lady’s sentiment that we all want to reassure people who are here, so we must be careful not to arouse a sense of insecurity among them. I do not know of any Member of this House in any party who wishes to remove EU nationals who are lawfully here and making their lives here. I have never met a European politician from any country—I have met quite a lot of them—who wishes to remove British nationals who have settled down there, as the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) pointed out. We are having a rather artificial debate here. Would it not be best if this were all sorted out at the summit tomorrow, with the leaders quickly agreeing among themselves that neither side would seek, in any negotiations, to remove nationals lawfully living in their respective territories?

Joanna Cherry: I always listen to the right hon. and learned Gentleman with great care, because he has made an amazing contribution to the debate about the European Union over the years. However, this is not an artificial debate. I hate to disillusion him, but a Conservative and Unionist party colleague of his in Scotland, a Member of the Scottish Parliament, suggested recently in a press release sanctioned by the Conservative and Unionist party that EU citizens living in Scotland should not have the same right to participate in civil society as others—for the record, that person was referring to a French national who lives in Scotland and was previously a Member of the Scottish Parliament—so it is a very real concern.

Several hon. Members rose—

Joanna Cherry: I will take more interventions later, but I would like to make some progress as I am conscious that many other Members want to speak.
Scotland is an inclusive and outward-looking society. We recognise the immense contribution that migrants make to our economy, society and culture. We firmly believe that similar views are held by many throughout the rest of the United Kingdom. We appeal to the UK Government to listen to the voices from across the UK of those who do not want EU nationals living in the United Kingdom used as bargaining chips in the Brexit negotiations. This Union of nations should be better than that.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I think we can agree that the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) is right to say that no one in this House would want to see EU nationals who are living and working here expelled. The point is that there are people out there who have been emboldened by the current political climate who want to see EU nationals living here expelled, and worse. The sort of signal that the hon. and learned Lady is calling for, which I support, would be very powerful in saying that the views of those people are wholeheartedly rejected by all right-thinking people.

Joanna Cherry: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. Gentleman for that point; I am also grateful for the support of the Liberal Democrats and, indeed, of Plaid Cymru for the motion.

Mr Nuttall rose—

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con) rose—

Joanna Cherry: I intend to make some progress. I will say a little about the valuable contribution that EU migrants make to our society across the UK. As we all know, about 3 million EU migrants live in the United Kingdom, about 173,000 of them in Scotland. Data produced during the EU referendum show that, contrary to popular myth, EU migrants to the UK make a net contribution to the economy. Indeed, the EU citizens who come to live and work in Scotland are critical to key sectors of our economy. More than 12% of the people who work in the agricultural sector in Scotland are EU migrants, and 11% of people who work in our important food, fish and meat processing sector are EU citizens. There are two major universities in my constituency, Edinburgh Napier University and Heriot-Watt; they would be gravely affected by a decrease in the number of EU nationals choosing to study, research and teach in Scotland.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): The hon. and learned Lady is making a wonderful case for the contribution that EU nationals make to Scottish and British public life; we must be much more confident in making that case. Does she agree that we should consider not just the contribution that they make, but in which particular sectors, such as the one she is about to come to in her speech? For example, 25% of the staff of the Edinburgh University King’s Buildings, our world-renowned science institute, are EU nationals. They need the certainty that they can stay so that Edinburgh can stay in the top 100 universities around the world.

Joanna Cherry: I am not going to give way; I will make some progress. This is a valid issue about which many constituents are very concerned. We would be failing in our responsibilities if we did not raise it, no matter how embarrassing it is for those on the Government Benches.

I want to get back to the contribution that migrants make to our economy. The hon. Member for Carmarthen East and Dinefwr (Jonathan Edwards) has already mentioned the NHS. As he said, 6% of doctors in Wales are EU migrants; it is just under 7% of doctors in Scotland. The British Medical Association and the Scottish Government say that 5% of the total NHS workforce were born in other EU countries. Put bluntly, our NHS would struggle to cope without them.

There are very valid concerns that pushing EU nationals to leave because of uncertainty about their future would have a devastating impact on the NHS, the hospitality and agriculture sectors, higher education and science, all of which rely heavily on labour from the EU. I also share the concerns raised by the Trades Union Congress, which has said that the longer we leave EU workers uncertain about their future, the greater the likelihood that they will leave, creating staffing shortages that will particularly negatively affect our public services. That will serve only to increase the concerns felt by those
who voted to leave the EU in order to increase resources for public services—and there is not much sign of that happening, is there?

Mr Nuttall: Talking of uncertainty, as the hon. and learned Lady was just then, may I ask her about the last few words of the motion? Why does it say “should the UK exit the EU”? Why is it “should”?

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): To annoy you, David!

Mr Nuttall: The reality is that 17.4 million people voted for this country to leave the European Union and we are going to leave. There is no “should” about it; that word should surely be “when”.

Joanna Cherry: I do not think I can answer the intervention better than my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands), but the hon. Gentleman will be aware that in Scotland, by a huge majority, we voted to remain a member of the EU. The SNP will do everything in its might to ensure that the wishes of the Scottish people are respected.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): The hon. and learned Lady makes a very powerful case. Am I right in saying that all she is seeking to do in this debate is to ensure there is clarity? The right hon. and learned Member for Glasgow South East (Joanna Cherry) was just then, may I ask her about the last word she shared? She said that she “would like to see any EU national leave the country”. Will she share with us in the best interests of every single individual in this country, EU national or otherwise? Will she share with me support for the First Minister’s statement on inclusivity and the need for leadership in this debate?

Joanna Cherry: I do share that. Indeed, the purpose of this motion is to invite the United Kingdom Government to follow the lead that the First Minister and the Scottish Government have shown in that respect.

Ian Murray: I am very grateful to the hon. and learned Lady for giving way again. Again, I emphasise that she is making a compelling speech. Do the Government not have to look at the will of this House, which in July voted by 245 votes to two to do the very thing for which her motion asks? Rather than making xenophobic speeches at the Conservative party conference, they should abide by the will of this House and do what this House has voted for already.

Joanna Cherry: The hon. Gentleman rightly refers to the debate on this issue on 6 July. The Government have failed to respect the outcome of the vote in that debate. Returning to the international concern about what is going on in the United Kingdom, the Polish ambassador gave evidence yesterday to the Lords EU Justice Sub-Committee. He said that he had noticed an increase in xenophobic behaviour in Britain since the Brexit vote. He expressed concern about the uncertainty being caused to Polish nationals living in the UK. So there we have another non-SNP voice talking about the very concern that has made us bring forward the motion today.

I am pleased that we have not seen any increase in hate crime north of the border, but we must always be vigilant to ensure that hate crime is made unacceptable across the whole of the United Kingdom.

Ben Howlett (Bath) (Con): I have been a remainer for a very long period of time. I have come to the Chamber and listened very intently to what the hon. and learned Lady is saying. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) said that nobody disagrees with what she is saying, and no one in this House disagrees with protecting EU nationals as well as we protect our British citizens. From one remainer to another, may I just ask why—I would have voted for it—you did not put this in your motion?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order.

Ben Howlett: Sorry, Madam Deputy Speaker, I did not mean you.

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman definitely, in everything he has just said, did not mean me. He has got the point without my saying anything further.

Joanna Cherry: The motion is as framed advisedly. If Conservative Members felt it could have been improved, it was open to them to bring forward an amendment. We would have looked at it carefully, as we always do. I am now going to make a little bit more progress. I am conscious that I have taken a lot of interventions and I want to wind up fairly soon.

I want to say a little bit about what the Scottish Government have been doing since the referendum. Members will recall that immediately after the referendum result the First Minister moved very quickly to give EU citizens in Scotland reassurance that
“the Scottish Government is pursuing every possible option to protect Scotland’s position in Europe and, by extension, the interests of the people from across the European Union who live here.”

Indeed, at an event unprecedented in my constituency in August, the First Minister held an open question and answer session with EU nationals. I can tell Conservative Members that it was extremely well attended by EU nationals living and working in my constituency and in other parts of Scotland. They had many concerns and questions for the First Minister about their status in the United Kingdom following the vote. At our conference last weekend, the SNP passed a motion condemning xenophobia and prejudice in all its forms, making it very clear, in no uncertain terms, that international citizens are welcome in Scotland. In her closing address to the SNP conference in Glasgow on Saturday, the First Minister talked of the “uniting vision” of “an inclusive, prosperous, socially just, open, welcoming and outward-looking country” and contrasted that with the xenophobic rhetoric of the UK Government. The difference between the SNP conference and the Tory conference could not be starker.

I am very well aware that the desire for inclusivity, openness and being welcome and outward-looking is not the preserve of the SNP and the Scots. It is shared by many people across these islands. It is about time that Conservative Members lived up to the good aspects of British tradition and the good aspects of our reputation abroad, and stopped undermining them by encouraging the sort of xenophobia we have seen in recent months as a result of some of their rhetoric. [Interruption] I am absolutely delighted to get such a reaction.

Dr Murrison: I am very grateful to the hon. and learned Lady for giving way. Nobody is suggesting that anybody is going to be ejected from the United Kingdom. Nobody is suggesting that there is a layer of complexity that she has completely ignored? If she is giving rights to people, who I think we would all accept, what effective date is she going to choose? What then happens when people go outside the UK and seek to return? All these things are also relevant to British nationals, on behalf of whom the Government have to negotiate.

Joanna Cherry: I must admit to deriving some satisfaction from the fact that my speech is touching such a raw nerve with those on the Government Benches. What I would say to Conservative Members is that actions and rhetoric have consequences, and these are the consequences of some of their actions and rhetoric.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) has often said that Scotland’s problem is not migration but emigration. We in Scotland would like immigration powers to be granted to Scotland in recognition of the differing needs across the United Kingdom, and the fact that in Scotland we require immigrants to help boost our economy and skills, particularly in remote areas. Both Australia and Canada pursue sub-national immigration policies that respond to the needs of skills and expertise across the regions within their states. Now is the chance for the United Kingdom to do likewise, but I shan’t hold my breath.

To be fair, even many leavers during the campaign, said: “there will be no change for EU citizens already lawfully resident in the UK.”

Speaking on Radio 4, the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Edgbaston (Ms Stuart), who co-chaired the campaign to leave the EU, said: “I think it would be good for the British Government to take the initiative, say that we will protect EU citizens’ rights, and then expect the same for UK citizens in the rest of the EU to be similarly protected.”

So there we have the answer to the question raised by Government Members. She went on to say: “One of the duties of politicians is to be humane and when we deal with people’s lives, I think to show that we are open, we are a welcoming country, that we simply decided to leave a political institution called the European Union, that doesn’t mean we are ignoring people’s rights.”

It is not often in recent months that I have found myself in agreement with the right hon. Lady, but on this occasion she is right: if the British Government do the right thing, take the initiative and say that they will protect EU citizens’ right, they could hope for a reciprocal gesture towards British citizens abroad, about whom we are all so concerned. It is a question of basic humanity—human beings should not be used as bargaining counters.

To conclude, I do not believe that this failure to reassure the EU nationals living in the United Kingdom represents the best traditions of these islands. Much of what underlies that failure and, I believe, the rise in hate crime, misinformation put about during the leave campaign. That is due also to a failure of leadership by the previous Prime Minister and many in the remain campaign to articulate the truth about the benefits that migration and EU migration bring to the UK. Sadly, that failure of leadership is being perpetuated by this new Government, as they spin rudderless in the tailwind of Brexit.

Now is the time to put things right, so today the SNP—with the support of others, for which we are very grateful—calls on the Government to provide a cast-iron guarantee for EU citizens who have made the UK their home; to reject and to continue to work on tackling the rise of xenophobia, which has been confirmed by the Home Office for England and Wales; to recognise that the UK-wide blanket approach to immigration policy is not working and disregards the national, regional and demographic differences across the UK; and, most of all, to reassure all those who choose to make Scotland and the UK their home, that their rights will be honoured, that they are welcome to remain here and that their vital contributions are valued by all of us. Until that commitment is given, people will have the sort of worry and uncertainty that leads them to flock to events such as that organised by the First Minister in Edinburgh, and to write emails to all of us on a regular basis.

2.2 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill): There are many limits to my capabilities, and one of those is the inability to be in two places at the same time. I apologise if I have to dash off at the conclusion of my remarks to give evidence to the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs, but the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union will wind up the debate and pass on any comments particularly directed at me.
My job this afternoon is to reassure the House of our aspirations to protect the interests of EU citizens living in the UK and to counter some of the scaremongering that we have just heard. When I read the motion on the Order Paper, I was concerned and thought that there was a typographical error whereby the word “should” had been substituted for the word “when”. The fact of the matter is, as the Prime Minister has made clear, that Brexit means Brexit, and we are determined to carry out the wishes of the British people to leave the European Union. The negotiations that take place will be to secure the best possible deal.

As the Secretary of State for Exiting the EU said in the Opposition day debate last week, the Government are determined that “Parliament will be fully and properly engaged in the discussion on how we make a success of Brexit.”—[Official Report, 12 October 2016, Vol. 615, c. 326.]

I am therefore pleased that the House has the opportunity to debate this aspect of our future relationship with the European Union.

There are over 3 million European Union nationals currently living in the UK. They make a vital contribution to important aspects of our economy and public services, not least in the NHS and care sector.

Keith Vaz: I thank the Minister for providing us with the figure of 3 million. However, some EU nationals will have arrived without passports, and those coming from Romania or Italy would have travel documents in order to enter the United Kingdom. How is the Minister’s figure a genuine one, given that he could not know precisely how many people are here?

Mr Goodwill: That is certainly one aspect of the negotiations that we would need to explore. Indeed, the security aspects of some of these travel documents are not as robust as passports that have the biometric data that is so important to ensure that people’s identity is clear when they are crossing borders.

Keith Vaz: I am not raising the issue of identity, which is, of course, important but a separate issue. My point is that when an EU national comes here—for example, a Romanian or an Italian—with a travel document instead of a passport, it is not stamped. EU citizens do not get their passports stamped. Is the Minister basing the 3 million figure on those who have acquired national insurance numbers, namely those in work, or is it based on some other data? That is what I want to know; it is not a security issue.

Mr Goodwill: The right hon. Gentleman is right. The 3 million figure can only be an estimate, particularly as exit checks have been introduced only recently. Although we might know who has come into the country, historically we were not aware of who had left. There are a number of ways of compiling the figures, including national insurance numbers, but there are other ways, too.

Charlie Elphicke: A few moments ago, the Minister was speaking warmly of the immense contribution made by EU nationals in the UK. Is he aware of any Conservative Member who is saying that EU citizens should leave this country, or is it purely coming from the other side?

Mr Goodwill: I think I have made the point previously that the only quote I have seen that has in some way threatened EU nationals was one from The Scotsman dated 14 July 2014, which referred to a specific threat that if Scotland was not allowed to join the European Union as an independent country, there would be a threat to the status of those people. If SNP Members are concerned about the accuracy of reports in The Scotsman, perhaps I could draw their attention to the official record of the Scottish Parliament’s Health and Sport Committee dated 27 September 2016—quite recently.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Goodwill: Let me make the point, after which the hon. Gentleman can have his try.

At a session of the Health and Sport Committee in Holyrood, Shona Robison, Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport, said that in response to the Brexit, the Scottish Government were looking at including additional questions on the workforce survey to try to gather more information about whether people are EU nationals or indeed where they come from more generally, and that that would be helpful. Following that, Sarah Gledhill, a Scottish Government official, confirmed that they were looking at adding additional questions to workforce surveys as a matter of urgency. Who is using whom as a political bargaining chip?

Stewart Hosie: I think workforce planning is a fantastic idea. On the quote from The Scotsman, I have the article with me. It is a very small article. The point that the then Deputy First Minister was making was that if Scotland were to be pulled out of the EU against its will, the rights of EU citizens might, of course, be put at risk. Lo and behold, having been pulled out of the EU against their will, the rights of EU citizens are being put at risk! The Minister could end this today. Can he guarantee that the rights of EU citizens will be protected, and will he stop pandering to the attitudes of the United Kingdom Independence party, which wants to use people as bargaining chips?

Mr Goodwill: Let me see what I can do. As Madam Deputy Speaker knows, my middle name is “Reasonable”, and I think we need to be a bit more reasonable and not indulge in scaremongering. Many EU citizens watching this debate will be unnecessarily concerned about some of the rhetoric that we have just heard.

The Government have been clear that they want to protect the status of EU nationals resident in the UK. As the Prime Minister has made clear, the only circumstances in which that would not be possible are if British citizens’ rights in other EU member states are not protected in return. The Government have provided repeat assurances on this point, and their position has not changed. I am sorry that the SNP has not included that reassurance in their motion.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Goodwill: Let me make a little progress, if I may.

I want to make it absolutely clear that the Government have also been clear that the timeframe for resolving this issue is to address it as part of a wider negotiation on the UK’s exit from the EU, to ensure the fair treatment of British citizens—including those from
Scotland, by the way—living in other EU countries. Over 1 million British citizens have built their lives elsewhere in Europe, and they are counting on us to secure their future. We simply want a fair deal for EU nationals in the UK and British citizens in the EU. That is a sensible approach, and it is the one we will take. As the House is aware, the Government have committed to invoking article 50 by the end of March 2017, once they have clear objectives for the Brexit negotiations.

Mr Kenneth Clarke: This is becoming increasingly baffling to me. I am afraid. I understand that the Minister is proposing to ask us to vote against the motion, but what he has just said confirms that the motion coincides exactly with the committed aim of the Government, which is to seek to ensure that all EU nationals who are living and working here can be reassured about their status. If we let the motion go through, the chances of some proposal from the continent that British nationals should be expelled is almost nil. Of course we might have to revisit the thing, but even then we would not want to take reprisals against wholly innocent people who are contributing to our economy here. Should we not get on to the next motion and stop splitting hairs in this way, given that we are all agreed on the objectives?

Mr Goodwill: My right hon. and learned Friend has made a perfectly reasonable point. The only problem that the Government have with the motion is that it does not go far enough, in that it does not include the rights of British citizens living in other EU member states, which we would demand to be protected in return. It is impossible for us to support the motion, because that reassurance is not contained in it.

I fully appreciate the importance of giving certainty to EU citizens who have built a life here in the United Kingdom. As I have already said, they should be reassured that we are working on the basis that we want to protect those people’s status in UK law beyond the point at which we leave the EU.

Lyn Brown: As the Minister knows, I am very fond of him—[Interruption.]. It is true; it is a guilty secret. However, I am genuinely wondering why he has not responded to the question asked a moment ago by his right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke). Why are we still debating this issue, given that the Government clearly agree with the motion?

Mr Goodwill: I have made it crystal clear, I hope, that the motion does not go far enough because it does not extend the protections that SNP Members want for EU citizens here in the UK to British citizens, including Scottish citizens—people from Stranraer, Montrose and Edinburgh—who are living and working elsewhere in the EU and who require reciprocal protection. That is all we are saying. If the SNP Members had included that in their motion, we would have been more than happy to support it, but this is a fatal omission.

Mr Harper: There is another reason why I think that my hon. Friend is right to be both reasonable and cautious. As a former Immigration Minister, knowing the difficult challenges that he faces, I suggest that one of the important things that the House must do in order to deliver certainty is use very clear language. Many immigration matters go to court. Referring to people who have made their home here does not make clear whether they are people who have been here for five years, 10 years or five minutes. That description also excludes the thousands of EU nationals who fall within a group that I do want to leave the United Kingdom—the thousands of EU nationals who currently reside in Her Majesty’s prisons having committed criminal offences, and whom I want the Government to be able to remove from this country at the end of their sentences.

This matter is complicated. It is not straightforward. I urge my hon. Friend to continue to be reasonable and careful, in order to get this right and provide the certainty that is necessary. The position is not as simple as the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) makes out.

Mr Goodwill: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. The issue is much more complex than it is sometimes painted, and we need to engage in the negotiations with that in mind.

We intend to reach an agreement as soon as possible, but the fact remains that there needs to be an agreement, and I strongly believe that it would be inappropriate to lay down unilateral positions. Indeed, it would be irresponsible to do so. In the meantime, as the Government have made clear on numerous occasions—I will repeat it again today—until the UK leaves the EU, there will be no changes in the circumstances of European nationals in the UK. They will continue to have to have the same rights under EU law that they had before the referendum.

As I have said, however, this issue is also about British citizens living and working in other EU member states and exercising their treaty rights. The Prime Minister has made clear that, through the negotiations, we are seeking to secure the best deal for Britain, and that deal rightly includes protecting the status of British citizens who are living, working and studying elsewhere in the EU. It is disappointing that the motion makes no reference to those British citizens. The Government are therefore unable to set out a definitive position now: that must be done following an agreement with the EU. Those EU nationals who are worried about their current status can have the Government’s complete reassurance that their right to enter, work, study and live in the UK remains unchanged. They continue to be welcome here.

Mr Alistair Carmichael: I share the Minister’s aspiration to protect the rights of UK citizens living elsewhere in the European Union, but may I suggest that the best way to achieve that end would be to make a commitment to EU citizens living here, thus creating an atmosphere in which positive negotiations on other matters might take place?

Mr Goodwill: I am sure the right hon. Gentleman agrees that, while this will be a negotiation of the willing on both sides, other complex issues, such as those identified by my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), will need to be worked out. Immigration is a complicated matter. However, I hope that, following what I have said today, EU citizens who are living and working here, exercising their treaty rights and contributing to the industries of our country...
we know that they make a fantastic contribution to, for instance, agriculture and the hospitality industry—will be reassured that we will seek to protect their status, while at the same time seeking to protect the status of UK citizens living and working elsewhere in the EU.

The Prime Minister has said in numerous statements that there will be no immediate changes in the circumstances of EU nationals. In addition, let me draw the House’s attention to the recent confirmation by the Department for Education that EU students applying for places at English universities or further education institutions in the 2017-18 academic year will continue to be eligible for student loans and grants for the duration of their courses.

Given that it is in the interests of all interested parties to protect the rights of their citizens once the UK exits the EU, we are confident that both EU and British citizens will be protected through a reciprocal arrangement following discussions. As I have said, I want to be able to conclude this matter as quickly as possible once negotiations begin, but there is a balance to be struck between transparency and good negotiating practice. Any attempt to pre-empt our future negotiations would risk undermining our ability to secure protection for the rights of British citizens living in the EU, and that is why we are unable to support the motion.

2.17 pm

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The Minister is now well established in his new role, but let me take this opportunity to welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker). I look forward to working with him and the rest of the team in the years ahead.

I am grateful to the SNP for bringing this issue back to the House. For the avoidance of any doubt—if the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone) were still in the Chamber, I would say that this applies particularly to him—I should make it clear that Opposition Members accept the result of the referendum. We simply want to ensure that our departure from the EU takes place on the best possible terms for the UK. As one of my colleagues said during last week’s Opposition day debate, the British people voted to come out; they did not vote to lose out. Providing guarantees for EU nationals now is part of securing the best deal for the UK. That is why we made it the topic of an Opposition day debate just two weeks after the referendum, and why we support the motion moved so ably today by the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry).

Back in July, as now, it was clear that the Government did not have a plan. They had no plan for what Leave would look like, and no plan for the 3 million EU nationals who are living, working and studying in our country. During that debate, however, one of the leading leave campaigners rightly pushed for certainty on the issue. He said:

“I would like to put on record what I think has been said already—that countless times the Vote Leave campaign gave exactly this reassurance to everybody from EU countries living and working here, and it is very, very disappointing that that should be called into question. I think it is absolutely right to issue the strongest possible reassurance to EU nationals in this country, not just for moral or humanitarian reasons, but for very, very sound economic reasons as well. They are welcome, they are necessary, they are a vital part of our society, and I will passionately support this motion tonight.”—[Official Report, 6 July 2016, Vol. 612, c. 939].

Let us give credit where it is due. After making that contribution, the right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) not only talked the talk but walked the walk, as did the overwhelming number of Members who voted for the motion to guarantee EU nationals the right to remain here. I hope that now that he is Foreign Secretary he is making the case even more strongly, because I guess in his new role at the Foreign Office he is learning the art of diplomacy.

Yes, he may have some way to go; I appreciate the Prime Minister is not yet entirely convinced. What he will know by now is that the way in which the Government have turned EU nationals living here into bargaining chips for the Brexit negotiations, or, as the Secretary of State for International Trade put it, “one of our main cards”, is not only deeply unfair to those concerned, but severely undermining our reputation with the very people with whom we want to be entering into negotiations next spring, not to mention the damage it does to our economy. Put simply, it is not in our national interest.

It is absolutely wrong for the Government to suggest that we cannot guarantee the status of EU nationals here—many of whom have been here for decades—without a reciprocal arrangement for UK nationals abroad. The Government are effectively asking people—doctors in our NHS, business owners and entrepreneurs, teachers in our schools—to put their lives on hold and wait until March 2019 to find out what their future holds. But many will want certainty for themselves and their families.

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): The following question then arises: if he were in the Government, what guarantees would the hon. Gentleman give to British citizens living in the EU regarding their rights? What possible guarantees or safeguards could he give them?

Paul Blomfield: By giving those guarantees to EU nationals living in this country, we set the marker, and we give the best guarantees to our citizens living in the rest of the EU by making that stand now.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Would it not therefore be better for Ministers to be out there negotiating and getting the reciprocal rights, rather than having to remain at the Dispatch Box for these futile debates that stop them getting on with the job?

Paul Blomfield: I think it would be much better if Ministers did not see EU nationals in this country as bargaining chips, but instead saw them as citizens contributing to our economy and society, as the Foreign Secretary said in the debate in July.

Mr Harper: The hon. Gentleman mentioned the Foreign Secretary and diplomacy, so may I ask a question that might test his? Does he agree with his party leader, and presumably his party’s policy, that Labour wants to continue having free movement even after we have left
[Mr Harper]

the EU? That is the position set out by his leader. Can he just confirm to the House, because we want clarity and certainty, if that remains his party’s position?

Paul Blomfield: The shadow Secretary of State made that very clear last week. The right hon. Gentleman misrepresents Labour’s position. I do not know whether he was present for the debate, but he might usefully read Hansard. Opposition Members accept that there will be adjustments to the arrangements and believe in reasonable management of migration.

Keith Vaz: I congratulate my hon. Friend. Most warmly on his appointment to his new post; I am sure that he will find it very challenging. The Opposition’s position is very clear, and it is the common-sense position, which is a double guarantee: we want to see British citizens keep their rights in the EU, and we want to give EU citizens their rights to stay here. No EU country has said that it wants British citizens to leave the EU. Does my hon. Friend agree?

Paul Blomfield: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right, and it is unfortunate that some of the cavalier comments by Ministers have put this issue on the table.

As I was saying, EU nationals want some certainty for themselves and their families, and, if we do not offer it, many of them will only find it by leaving the UK. That is unfair to them, but it is also a loss to our country.

The Opposition do not believe in cutting off our nose to spite our face. We want unilateral and immediate action from the Government to guarantee the status of EU nationals who contribute so much to our society, and we do not believe that that will undermine the Government’s ability to secure the status of UK nationals living in other EU countries, because we believe that they, too, are an asset to the communities in which they have set up home.

If the Government position is not playing too well with our partners abroad, it is not going down well here at home either. Polling for British Future conducted immediately after the referendum shows that an overwhelming majority of both leave and remain voters take the same view: EU nationals should be allowed to stay. Some 84% of people, including 77% of leave voters, want existing EU nationals to stay. Some 84% of people, including 77% of leave voters, want existing EU nationals to stay. In the meantime the status of UK nationals in other European countries is no more secure since Brexit negotiations are ongoing.

In his statement to the House last week the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union said that “five out of six migrants who are here either already have indefinite leave to remain or will have it by the time we depart the Union.”—[Official Report, 10 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 48.]

We are grateful to the SNP for bringing the issue back to the House, and we repeat the call we made in July, which this House endorsed, that the Government should provide immediate clarity to EU nationals who are taking decisions about their future now.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Time is limited and many Members wish to speak. I will impose an initial time limit of eight minutes, with the proviso that it might well have to be reduced.

James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): I will endeavour to keep my comments pithy—I do not have a lisp. First, I thank the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) for being so unwilling to take interventions from my hon. Friend during her speech, because so many of the points I had scribbled down for my speech were being brought up by colleagues that otherwise I would have nothing left to say.

I had intended to begin by saying that I assumed that the motion was driven by genuine concern, rather than a desire to play simple party politics. Unfortunately, however, as the hon. and learned Lady’s speech progressed, I found it less easy to maintain that position, because, time and again, I heard examples of this important issue being used as a Trojan horse simply to cast unpalatable accusations at my party. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) says from a sedentary position, “Look in the mirror.” I look in the mirror every morning when I shave, and what I see is a black face looking back at me. When hon. Members start accusing Conservative Members of being xenophobic, I ask that they reflect on those comments before they start accusing.—[Interruption.]

It means that decisions to invest or expand businesses are being scrapped because EU nationals do not want to wait until 2019 to find out if they are welcome and public services are strained further as EU doctors, nurses and teachers uproot and move somewhere they are welcome and can plan for their future. In the meantime the number of EU nationals in other European countries is no more secure since Brexit negotiations are ongoing.

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Leaving aside the arrogant assumption that EU nationals will just wait around and hope that they will be okay rather than go somewhere they know they will be welcome, what will concern EU citizens who heard that statement is that indefinite leave to remain is not handed out automatically on the basis of length of residency. It has to be applied for, and applying for it is costly and onerous, and there are no guarantees. Perhaps the Minister can today clarify whether that is really what our offer is to those helping run our public services and contributing to our economy—“Stick around for two years and you might be able to apply for indefinite leave to remain.” That is simply not good enough: it is not good enough for them, and it is not good enough for our country.

We are grateful to the SNP for bringing the issue back to the House, and we repeat the call we made in July, which this House endorsed, that is the Government should provide immediate clarity to EU nationals who are taking decisions about their future now.

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We are grateful to the SNP for bringing the issue back to the House, and we repeat the call we made in July, which this House endorsed, that is the Government should provide immediate clarity to EU nationals who are taking decisions about their future now.
Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Comments are to be reflected upon and discussed; they are not be made from a sedentary position. If the hon. Member for Darlington wishes her comments to be noted, she should stand up and make them. If not, she should not make them.

James Cleverly: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Several hon. Members rose—

James Cleverly: Time is limited, so I will make some progress. The most important point—this has been brought up numerous times by my hon. Friends, but it has been ignored and left unanswered by the motion’s proposer and those Labour Members who support it—is that British citizens currently living in the EU have had no confirmation about their future status. I remind Members that it is not from the British side of the negotiating relationship that we hear words such as “punishment”. It is from voices at the Commission—EU members—that we hear that Britain needs to be punished. I have spent a lot of time scouring the internet, but I am yet to find an assurance from the EU that British citizens can expect protection as part of the negotiations.

Dr Philippa Whitford: The hon. Gentleman casts an aspersion that members of the Commission are threatening British citizens in Europe. Has he actually seen, read or heard that, because nobody else has? We started it: we voted to leave, so we are the ones who have to start the solution.

James Cleverly: No Government Members or likely members of the negotiation team have been using words such as “punishment”. We should respect the decision of the British people and enter the negotiations—this has been said by Members on both sides of the House, to be fair—with a desire to get the best outcome not only for the British people and our friends and colleagues in the EU, but for British people living in the EU and EU nationals living in Britain. Our collective desired outcome is to come out of the negotiating period with a relationship that works for the EU, us and all people living both in the EU and in the UK.

An estimated 1.2 million British nationals live in the EU, and at the moment their status has a question mark over it. Yet we heard nothing from SNP or Labour Members, despite the numerous opportunities they were given, about whether any effort has been made to secure the status of those British nationals. My right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), who has unfortunately left the Chamber, was right to say that the British Government’s first responsibility is to the British people. While there is a question mark over the status of British nationals living in the EU, unfortunately it is not legitimate for us to say, unilaterally, that we are going to secure the rights of EU nationals.

James Cleverly: I am short of time, so I am afraid that I am going to make progress. As the son of a migrant, I absolutely recognise the incredible value to the UK of immigrants from EU countries and wider afield. This Government have said on many occasions that the value of migrants will be recognised, both now and moving forward.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): I am the daughter of an immigrant. Does it not cause the hon. Gentleman great concern that, since the EU referendum, there has been an exponential rise in hate crime in England and Wales? That is not the position in Scotland.

James Cleverly: I do not have access to the detailed figures or the time to answer that question fully, but I would be more than happy to have an extended discussion about the validity of those figures. With the best will in the world, I find it hard to believe that there have been no racially motivated crimes north of the border.

The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West, who moved the motion, kept saying that people were being used as bargaining chips. That fundamentally misses the point that everything we do in politics, including every policy position and every negotiating position we take with the EU, is about people. Politics is about people—always has been, always will be. Every decision that we make through this negotiation will have an impact on people. Yes, our collective attitude towards migration policies has an effect on people, but so do our policies on trade and agricultural subsidies. All those things have a real effect on people. To single out one element of a future negotiation and say that we should unilaterally close it down suggests a naive at best and cynical at worst attitude to our negotiating position. I want the negotiations to be successful for both Great Britain and the EU, but that will not be possible if Great Britain takes unilateral decisions. It has been confirmed from the Dispatch Box that if our EU partners provided a resolution on this issue, it would go away immediately, yet I have heard nothing from them.

Our Government need to have the flexibility to negotiate the best possible deal for the British people. I encourage hon. Members who support the motion to put as much energy and passion into speaking to people on the continent with whom they may have influence about clarifying the position of British nationals in the EU. The whole issue would then be taken off the table and we would end up in the position that I think Members on both sides of the House want—namely, that of having a positive attitude towards the negotiations, with the ultimate goal of giving as much clarity and reassurance as possible both to EU nationals living here and to British nationals living in the EU. I call on Members to reject the motion.

2.39 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The simple reason we should make the move is that it is the UK that has voted to leave. It is we who have caused the insecurity, whether for our citizens in Europe or for EU nationals here, so it is incumbent on us to make the
move to try to deal with that. As for the idea that people are not having problems, I have constituents struggling to get loans or mortgages for businesses and for houses. It is ridiculous to say that they are not concerned; they absolutely are. The idea that they should spend two years in limbo is frankly appalling.

Obviously, with my health background, I can say that we know that our health and social care system completely depends on EU nationals. We have more than 50,000 such doctors and nurses. The Minister was berating Shona Robison about trying to collect the data in Scotland, but we do not have data for Scotland. The 130,000 is for England, because we never considered it at all relevant where someone who was settled in Scotland came from and therefore never asked. Now, we need to know how many people might have an issue, whether it is that they will get thrown out or that they will get fed up with the insecurity and leave.

The other question is how we think we will attract more. One in 10 medical jobs in England is empty; we have massive rota gaps. How easy do we think it will be more. One in 10 medical jobs in England is empty; we have massive rota gaps. How easy do we think it will be to attract EU doctors to come and fill those posts in the coming years when the message they get is that they are not having problems, I have constituents struggling to turn their backs on this new Brexit Britain.

Dr Whitford: Obviously, with my health background, I can say that we know that our health and social care system completely depends on EU nationals. We have more than 50,000 such doctors and nurses. The Minister was berating Shona Robison about trying to collect the data in Scotland, but we do not have data for Scotland. The 130,000 is for England, because we never considered it at all relevant where someone who was settled in Scotland came from and therefore never asked. Now, we need to know how many people might have an issue, whether it is that they will get thrown out or that they will get fed up with the insecurity and leave.

The other question is how we think we will attract more. One in 10 medical jobs in England is empty; we have massive rota gaps. How easy do we think it will be to attract EU doctors to come and fill those posts in the coming years when the message they get is that they are not terribly welcome and that, if they come, they might be asked to go home because they came after—

James Cleverly rose—

Dr Whitford: The hon. Gentleman was not keen on taking interventions, so I shall crack on.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: My hon. Friend talks about how EU nationals might feel about coming here in future. Does she share my concern and that of my constituents that this goes right back to the debates in this House on the European Union Referendum Bill, in which we even froze them out of having a vote on the issue? The message is not good, and they might decide to turn their backs on this new Brexit Britain.

Dr Whitford: Absolutely. So much of this is about not technicalities but the message we give outside this place. As my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) said in winding up her speech, it is also about Britain’s reputation. Britain previously had a reputation for fairness. Look at the second or third generation of immigrants, who have made their home for generations in this country. Now we say, “You might not be able to stay,” or, “You might not be able to come.” The best way to secure the place of British nationals in Europe is for us to be gracious.

The hon. Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) asked what we have done to try to make the position secure. I am on the all-party parliamentary group on Germany; we raised this issue both when we met the ambassador here and when we visited Berlin, and they were incredulous that we would even think that they would ask British nationals to go away. They said, “Should we make a move?” It is our move to make because the UK has created this situation.

We cannot survive without these people in the NHS and, in particular, the 80,000 who work in social care. If they apply because they are anxious for British citizenship, it will cost them almost £1,500 per head, per member of their family, to do so. That is quite a lot when someone might not even be earning the minimum wage. If the final position is that they are eventually treated the same as non-EEA citizens, it will cost £4,000 per head, including the NHS surcharge, which, despite working in it, they might actually have to pay to access it. To say that these things are trivial and that these people should be reassured is, I think, naive.

There is already an impact on medical research and academia. When I was at the graduation of my local university just a week after Brexit, had lost a senior researcher from mainland Europe who was almost at the point of stepping on the boat. He said, “Why would I move my children to an English-speaking school? Why would I disrupt and move my family when I might get sent home in two years?” The idea that this is having no effect and that people should just cling on to soft reassurance is childish. We are the ones who need to make the first move and we should make that move. Future agreements can be negotiated, but everyone settled here on 23 June or earlier should have that right to remain and we are the ones who should make that move.

The APPG visited Berlin and it was very interesting. I picked up a couple of points. Peter Altmaier, second-in-command to Angela Merkel, was quite shocked that we use the term EU migrant. He said that they would never use that term; to them, migrant means someone from outside Europe. It would be like our being described as Scottish migrants, or Irish migrants, within the British Isles. It seems abhorrent.

Kwasi Kwarteng: This is the nub of the issue with the Brexit vote. The Germans are quite happy to describe people from outside the EU as migrants, but not people from within the EU. It was that exclusive club that I think led many ethnic communities in Britain to the out vote.

Dr Whitford: Frankly, this is an immigration arrangement from Europe. If the hon. Gentleman thinks that having stirred up the anti-immigrant view that led to leave we are going to say that we will not take EU nationals but that we will take many more people from all over the world, he is deluding himself.

Another point came up when members of our group said that Europe had to change free movement, so that we could stay in the single market. Where were we sitting at that moment? We were sitting in what had previously been East Berlin. We need to understand that for all Germans and east Europeans free movement of people comes from the heart; it is not a technical problem. They do not realise that we do not understand that. Twenty-seven years ago, there was a wall through Berlin. The last person trying to get over it was shot just a few months before it came down. Angela Merkel could not travel west until she was 36 years old.

David T. C. Davies rose—

Dr Whitford: I am sorry, but I am running out of time.

In our debate in July, I mentioned that my husband Hans is a GP who has worked in our NHS for 30 years. At first, he did not really think that this concerned him, because he thought that it would all disappear, but four
months on it has not. The problem is that these people are finding it terrible. The Minister said in that debate that anyone who had been here about five years could apply for right to remain, and when I mentioned my husband he said, “Oh, he can definitely stay.” My husband has printed out Hansard and is keeping it in his passport to prove absolutely that he has his personal reassurance. The Minister also said in that debate that we would have to consider what rights and benefits they have and which of our public services they can access. My husband, nearing retirement after 30-odd years in the NHS, is really concerned that he might get to stay but might suddenly have to pay for the healthcare he has been delivering for 30 years. And we are told that we are the scaremongers.

The story of my husband’s family is this. His father was German; his mother was Polish. They met during the War and were not allowed to marry. They had a child who was taken away from them. They were lifted and interrogated by the Gestapo. His father was imprisoned and his mother was turned into a forced labourer. Long before this debate arose, my husband used to say, “I can’t believe that in one generation I have and which of our public services they can access. I am rising not to support the motion but to say that I have been delivering for 30 years. And we are told that we are the scaremongers.

2.48 pm
Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con): It is with some sadness that I rise to contribute to the debate, because where I can I, as a fellow Celt and a Welsh MP, look to support much of what my friends the Members from Scotland do. I was a happy remaine last year. I should like to ask him whether he was at the Tory party conference. I was indeed at the conference, with many EU nationals from my constituency and from my team in this Parliament. I have EU nationals working for and with me. This is absolute nonsense. It is scaremongering and it is terrible. The scaremongering is coming from those on the Opposition Benches and it is deplorable—

Dr Philippa Whitford: What about “bargaining chips”? Craig Williams: Is this about bargaining chips? No it is not.

I fear that SNP Members are trying to rerun the arguments of the referendum. I was with them on many of those arguments during the referendum, but I am afraid that we lost. I know that it is the ambition of SNP Members to ignore referendum results until they get them right, but speaking as a Welsh Member, I do not take that view. We must now respect the will of the British people.

Joanna Cherry: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that during the independence referendum in Scotland, the leader of the Conservative and Unionist party in Scotland, Ruth Davidson, told the voters of Scotland that the only way they could guarantee their continued EU membership was to vote to remain part of the UK? Does he agree that that is now a broken promise?

Craig Williams: Absolutely not. Ruth Davidson is a politician without parallel in Scotland and I am incredibly proud that she leads our party up there. I was up there during the independence referendum, campaigning alongside her. I could happily chuck in many quotes during the independence referendum, campaigning alongside her. I could happily chuck in many quotes from the Spanish Government echoing my point about Scottish membership of the European Union, but that would do nothing for my constituents. Much of this debate will do nothing for the EU nationals in my constituency who are seeking leadership and certainty from this place. We are hearing that from the Government, but not from Members across the House who want to use this issue as a political football. That is deplorable.

I want to quote some Government Ministers at this point. The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union has said:

“We always welcome those with skills, the drive and the expertise to make our nation better still. If we are to win in the global marketplace, we must win the global battle for talent.”
How much more welcoming could anyone be towards EU nationals, or indeed towards the world, than that? The Home Secretary has said:

“I believe immigration has brought many benefits to the nation. It has enhanced our economy, our society and our culture. That is why I want to reduce net migration while continuing to ensure we attract the brightest and the best”.

This is what my constituents put me here to do. This is the Government I am supporting and I am delighted to do so. The Prime Minister has said:

“Let me be absolutely clear: existing workers’ legal rights will continue to be guaranteed in law—and they will be guaranteed as long as I am Prime Minister”.

I can assure the House that she will be Prime Minister of this great country for many years to come and that those workers’ rights will be guaranteed. The Economic Secretary to the Treasury made a speech to representatives of the UK financial services industry recently, in which he said of the negotiations that, as long as we get a comparable relationship with other EU nations, there will be no question but that EU nationals who are already working here will be able to stay. The nub of the question is that we must achieve a reciprocal arrangement with our EU neighbours.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to my Welsh colleague for giving way. He has quoted various Ministers, and indeed the Prime Minister, on the subject of people working in this country. What does he have to say to the EU nationals living in my constituency who are pensioners? They have had no such reassurances from Ministers or from the Prime Minister. The hon. Gentleman keeps talking about the workers and the brightest and the best, and I am sure that everyone welcomes the fact that such people are working in this country, but I am not scaremongering when I say that my constituents who have retired and who are living here have had no assurances from those on the Government Front Bench that they have the right to remain here.

Craig Williams: I personally want them to remain here happily spending their money in our economy, but what about the British pensioners in Spain who are spending their money in the Spanish economy? This is the point: there must be a reciprocal arrangement. If British pensioners in EU states can be protected, we will protect the EU pensioners in this state. That is the nub of the issue.

This has been a sad debate for me, as a remainer and now a committed leaver. I want to work constructively across the House to protect the best bits of the European Union while getting the best possible agreement for British citizens who currently reside in the EU, be they pensioners, workers, students or those doing research. However, it is clear that this whole issue is being hijacked by Opposition Members to provoke needless outrage, and that does not help anybody. I hope that the speakers who follow me will try to change the tone of the debate and help my constituents in Cardiff.

2.58 pm

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to support such a consistent politician as the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Craig Williams)—a remain one day and a leaver the next! However, he made a strong case for a guarantee for EU citizens to remain in this country. The difficulty is that all those amazing quotes he has gathered—which the hon. Member for Braintree (James Cleverly), with all his internet shopping, was unable to give us—are actually worth nothing unless they are spoken from the Dispatch Box. The hon. Member for Cardiff North is right to say that Ministers and others have talked about the contribution made by EU nationals, but at the end of the day it is for the Government to make those statements here in this House or in written statements.

I congratulate the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) on her powerful, eloquent and clear speech. In fact, all that she has sought is clarity, and all that we have heard from Ministers so far—the Minister for Immigration has left the Chamber, leaving it to the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, whom I congratulate on his appointment, to answer for the Government—is that it is all going to be all right on the night, but they just cannot say that in the House of Commons. All Members of the House have made the point that clarity is extremely important. If we have that clarity, it will be clear where we stand and there will be no need for the Opposition to keep bringing this debate back to the House every two weeks or so.

Dr Philippa Whitford: Does the right hon. Gentleman recognise that we are the White Queen in these negotiations and that we have to make the first move? If that move is gracious, it will invite a gracious response.

Keith Vaz: The hon. Lady, who made a powerful speech, is right. It is possible for us to take that position, and the position of the other EU countries is also clear because nobody has said that they want to do any damage to British citizens abroad, so we can show leadership by saying what the deal is. That would clear the matter up immediately.

The problem with putting the matter into the negotiations is the disparity of numbers. There are 1.2 million British citizens in the EU and 3 million EU citizens here. We do not want people to say as part of the negotiations that we will have absolute parity of numbers. That is what worries me.

The Minister nods. He will have the chance when he winds up the debate to state that there will be no question of our saying to the other EU countries that we will allow only 1.2 million people to stay. That is why it is far better to be clear about the rights of EU citizens now than to wait until the end of the negotiations.
There are three possible cut-off dates: 23 June, the date of the referendum; 31 March 2017; and 31 March 2019. I favour the date of the referendum, because it is absolutely clear. Others may favour the date that we actually leave the EU, but the point is that we are making a mess of our immigration policy if we keep negotiating in this way. We need absolute clarity, particularly on immigration. The Government are worried that if they wait until 31 March 2019, there will be a spike in EU citizens coming to this country before we exit in order to secure the right to stay here. When the Minister comes to wind up, I hope that he will give us the figures for how many EU nationals have actually come to Britain. In fact, many are so worried that they are considering leaving our country because they simply do not know where they stand.

The right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) asked the SNP whether it was necessary to keep bringing this debate to the House when the matter is actually all settled. I am sure that it is settled in his mind and my mind, but it is not settled in Government policy. However, we can have a settled Government policy. We just heard an excellent statement from the Immigration Minister that EU citizens who are studying in the UK will be allowed to remain and get the support that they have had in the past. If a Minister can come to the Dispatch Box and make a clear statement of that kind to reassure EU nationals who are studying here, it is simple for the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union to get up and make exactly the same statement about EU nationals who are resident here. The fact that the SNP included the word “should” in its motion should not stop the Government supporting it. They had the opportunity to enter into negotiations with the SNP, as we saw last week when they avoided another vote, which everyone thought was going to happen but which did not happen, thanks to the position taken by the Government. If we are trying to ensure that the fears of EU nationals are put to one side and that EU nationals are reassured, we can easily make such a statement today.

My next point relates to the right hon. Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), a former Immigration Minister, who said in his intervention on the current Immigration Minister that we would also consider the matter of EU nationals in our prisons as part of the negotiations. That is news to me. I did not realise that that was going to be part of the negotiations. Over the past 10 years, successive Governments have been trying to send EU citizens back. They constitute 10% of the entire prison population and we have not been able to move them out. Are we suggesting that we will put the question of EU citizens in our prisons into the negotiating pot as part of the deal for allowing EU citizens to remain here?

Mr Kenneth Clarke: We have an EU agreement whereby all EU Governments agree that they will exchange prisoners, so the current legal position allows that to happen. The problems that have stopped that happening are largely logistical and rather wrapped up in the bureaucracy of the Interior Ministries of different countries. At the moment we have reciprocal agreements, and EU countries are allowed to accept our own nationals to complete their sentence in their own country if they are returned as prisoners from other countries.

Keith Vaz: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is absolutely right. He probably negotiated that agreement when he was either Home Secretary or Lord Chancellor. There is therefore no need to put that into the negotiations because it is already there, although Poland has a derogation and the Polish situation will become live again only at the end of this year.

The Minister is in his first, well-deserved job in government and can make a hero of himself to the Government Whips, because they will not need to keep bringing back debates on the European Union and the rights of nationals, to Worcester and to the EU. Rather like the hon. Member for Cardiff North (Craig Williams), he was a remainder but is now a committed exerter as a result of the decision on 23 June. All we seek is clarity, so let us be clear. Nothing is put at risk by accepting what the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West has said. Let us put the matter to bed. Otherwise, the Minister can be sure that the issue will return again and again.

Finally, the EU summit is tomorrow and the Prime Minister will presumably, since we are still members of the EU, be there. Some Members have suggested that Members of this House should begin the negotiations, which is well above our pay grade, but the Prime Minister is going to that EU summit tomorrow. The will of the House can be expressed today and the Prime Minister can begin the discussions on this particular issue tomorrow. I am sure that she will get a positive reply from the other EU leaders.

3.8 pm

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): I echo the comments about how disappointing it is that the SNP chose to play a game of political football rather than to discuss the issues seriously. There is little in the motion that I would disagree with except for the word “should”, to which I will return in a moment. The motion asks us to recognise the huge contribution that people from other EU countries have made to this country. Of course we all recognise their contribution. That point has been made over and over again on these Government Benches, and inside and outside the House by people in both the remain and leave camps. Let me say it again: people from other European Union nations have made an enormous contribution to this country. They are very welcome in this country. They were welcome before the referendum took place, they are welcome now and they will be welcome after we exit the EU.

Keith Vaz: May I add the hon. Gentleman’s wife, who is of Hungarian origin, to that list of people?

David T. C. Davies: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman. I was going to mention that. I declare an interest that my wife is Hungarian. My children are completely bilingual and have dual nationality. It is a cliché, but when I say that some of my closest friends are from eastern Europe, I mean that I go on holiday and share houses with them, which makes me pretty close friends. It is ridiculous even to suggest that people who are involved in the leave campaign—dare I say that I was the leader of the campaign in Wales?—have some kind of xenophobic or anti-EU agenda.

At the same time, we should also be making it clear that we welcome the contribution of professionals from countries outside the EU. I have dealt with many EU
nationals who work in the NHS and the public sector in Wales, but I have also dealt with doctors from Egypt, businessmen from India and nurses from the Philippines, and they are also making a huge contribution to our economy. These people from outside the EU nations are also very welcome and will continue to be so. It is ridiculous to suggest that people from EU states should somehow be scared or worried about what is going to happen when we leave the EU, given that we already welcome and appreciate the contribution of so many people from outside it.

This Government have put compassion at the heart of their policy. We are spending more money on foreign aid than any other Government in this country has ever done and more than any other country in Europe is doing; we have ring-fenced NHS spending in England—Labour certainly has not done that in Wales; and we are dedicated to ironing out the inequality within the education sector. It is ludicrous in the extreme to suggest that anyone on any part of the Government Benches would ever want to round up people from other EU nations and throw them out—that is a fantasy and it will never, ever happen. Nobody wants it to happen and nobody has ever called for it to happen. I am just grateful for the opportunity to say that clearly once again.

Apparently, there have been issues with hate crime. May I say once again, as someone who was heavily involved in the leave campaign, that I, along with everyone I campaigned with, unreservedly condemn any form of hate crime towards anyone, be they from EU nations or outside, and whether it is because of their sexual orientation, the colour of their skin, their religion or their nationality? I, along with every person I have ever worked with on the leave campaign and with every person I have been involved with in politics, totally condemn that sort of behaviour. We should not run away with the idea that people from eastern Europe or from other European nations are constantly being hassled as they walk around; in my experience, which is considerable, that is simply not happening. I have been married for 13 years to somebody who moved here from eastern Europe and who has never been a victim of that sort of behaviour. I am not suggesting it does not happen, but I sometimes think there is a tendency to over-exaggerate.

Joanna Cherry: Does the hon. Gentleman accept the statistics produced by the Home Office showing that hate crime has increased by 41% in England and Wales since the EU referendum? Does he accept those stats produced by his Government’s Home Office?

David T. C. Davies: Of course, but the statistics have increased because the Government have rightly said that they are determined to stamp out hate crime and are looking to police forces—

Several hon. Members rose—

David T. C. Davies: Let me answer the question and then perhaps I will give way again. The Home Office has rightly said that it is determined to stamp out hate crime and it is expecting police forces to produce figures and to seek out examples. Of course we also face the additional problem that social media sites such as Twitter make it easier for keyboard warriors to commit hate crimes—one has only to look at my feed today to see that that is the case.

Joanna Cherry: I am very interested by what the hon. Gentleman has just said, as I think he is suggesting that the Home Office has changed the basis on which it calculates hate crime in the UK since the EU referendum. Would he like to tell us his source for that? Or perhaps the Minister will be able to help us with that later.

David T. C. Davies: I have not suggested that; I have said that the Home Office is rightly determined to stamp out hate crime and it has asked police forces to be much more rigorous in getting the figures. The Home Office will be looking to use those figures to investigate this, and quite right too; there is nothing wrong with that. But what I find concerning is that the hon. and learned Lady seems to have tried to make a correlation between hate crime and Brexit, and the clear and worrying implication of what they are doing is to suggest that the 17.2 million people who legitimately voted for Brexit are in some way responsible for hate crimes. That is an absolutely outrageous suggestion and I hope that—

Joanna Cherry rose—

David T. C. Davies: I hope that if I give way to her for the third time, the hon. and learned Lady will take this opportunity to make it very clear that those people who voted to leave the EU were exercising their democratic right to do so and do not, in any way, support hate crimes.

Joanna Cherry: I was going to ask the hon. Gentleman this: how does he explain the 40% increase in hate crime in England and Wales since the referendum if it is not down to the vote? To what does he attribute this? How does he explain why there has been no such increase in Scotland? We would love to hear his wisdom on that.

David T. C. Davies: I am not an expert on Scotland, but I can tell the hon. and learned Lady that the Government are absolutely determined to stamp out hate crime and are rightly demanding that police forces come forward with those figures, and I am very glad that they have done so. The problem she has is the same as a conundrum I faced about 17 or 18 years ago when I was on the losing side of the referendum on whether or not we should have a Welsh Assembly. That all went through on a very small vote and issues were raised about how the press had handled it. Those in the anti-Assembly campaign all sat down afterwards and thought, “What are we going to do? We should challenge this and get the Lords to chuck it out. It is outrageous. How dare they do this on the basis of a vote of about one in four of the population?” At that time, I was probably a little less older and wiser than I am now, and I was probably all for fighting the campaign and re-running the whole referendum. I am glad that wiser heads within the Conservative party prevailed and those in the anti-Assembly campaign said, “Hang on a minute, people have voted for this. It may only be one in four of the population in Wales and we lost out by only a few thousand votes, but the reality is that people have voted for it and we now need to let them get on with it.” What we did was to appoint to the National Assembly advisory group somebody who is now a Conservative Minister, Nick Bourne, who became a very good friend. He decided that he was going to get the Conservative party involved in this, to iron out the details of what was actually going on.
The motion’s use of the word “should” is what would lead me to vote against it; the rest of the motion is absolutely fine. We do recognise the contribution that is being made by EU migrants within the UK, and the Government are doing everything they can to ensure that their rights are respected post-Brexit. The whole point of what the Government are doing at the moment is to say to other EU nations and to the EU itself, “Look, we’ve got 3 million people here. We want to protect their rights. We want to ensure that their freedom to move around continues in every single way, but you are going to need to reciprocate in some way.” As someone who is married to an EU immigrant, may I say that I utterly support what the Government are doing and trust them to do exactly the right thing?

Dr Philippa Whitford: I gently point out that this is a debate on the EU and not on Wales. It is absolutely the case that people who voted leave are not racist or xenophobic, but unfortunately what that vote has done is give authorisation to people who feel emboldened, now they are in the majority, and we have seen these incidents across the country.

David T. C. Davies: Everyone absolutely condemns any form of hate crime. The hon. Lady made a point earlier about Berlin and the Berlin wall, so let me say how strongly I feel about that. I have visited Sopron, where the Berlin wall really fell: the videos of people cutting through the barbed wire can be seen on YouTube. These were people from Berlin who had gone on holiday in that summer of 1989 to Sopron in Hungary. They snipped through the wire and walked into Austria because they had been told that they were not going to get shot at for doing so. It was there that the Berlin wall really began to fall and the socialist Government in East Germany finally realised that their blinkered view of how people should live their lives was not going to prevail because people do demand freedom.

We are not in the business of erecting a wall as a result of Brexit; we are in the business of taking down a wall—a much less violent wall but one that exists around the European Union—going out into the world and giving people the freedom to trade and to do business all over the world. That is what this is all about.

Let me finish by saying how delighted I am that the hon. Lady made a point earlier about Berlin and the Berlin wall, so let me say how strongly I feel about that. I have visited Sopron, where the Berlin wall really fell: the videos of people cutting through the barbed wire can be seen on YouTube. These were people from Berlin who had gone on holiday in that summer of 1989 to Sopron in Hungary. They snipped through the wire and walked into Austria because they had been told that they were not going to get shot at for doing so. It was there that the Berlin wall really began to fall and the socialist Government in East Germany finally realised that their blinkered view of how people should live their lives was not going to prevail because people do demand freedom.

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Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. This has been such a lively and excellent debate, with so many interventions that speeches have gone way over the official time limit to six minutes, but I am afraid that I therefore now have to reduce the official time limit to six minutes, but I am sure there will still be lively interventions.

3.18 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): I commend the words of my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) when setting out the case as to why it is important that we give reassurance to European citizens across the UK. That case is even more focused in Scotland and, in particular, in the highlands, given the history there of struggling over many centuries to retain our population. Our issue is one of emigration and being able to retain young people and young families—being able to make the highlands a place where people will stay. We have done great work over the past decade or so to turn around the situation where people are leaving. I wish to read out two quotes from a report by Highland Council, the first of which is:

“An area at risk of depopulation needs to welcome those who want to make it their home.”

As a former leader of Highland Council, I am particularly proud that it also put forward this statement in the report.

“Highlanders have always warmly welcomed people from other countries who choose to live and work in our area and it will be important at this time to provide reassurance to EU nationals that this welcome continues and that we value their contribution to Highland life.”

Highland Council drew up this report and put out its statement on a cross-party basis—all parties and none. There was no scaremongering. The council just saw a need to reassure people, and I wholeheartedly agree with it on that.

I wish to talk about language. When we talk about the welcome that people have in Scotland and in the highlands, let me be absolutely clear that welcome means welcome. A French national came to my surgery recently. He had been living in our area for 30 years and spoke with a Scots-French accent. He was concerned that he might have to make changes. In our economy, we depend on EU nationals for our agriculture and fisheries, food industry, hospitality industry, the care industry and the NHS, and the tourism industry. One local hotel owner told me that, during the busy part of the year, 40% of his employees are EU nationals. We require these people. The new University of the Highlands and Islands depends on European involvement as well as the young people.

This issue does not just affect the highlands and Scotland. Antony Walker, chief executive officer of TechUK, said:

“The UK is one of the leading digital economies in the world. Part of the reason is because the UK is able to attract the world’s most talented individuals to fill jobs where the UK simply does not have the domestic skills base. Making it harder for tech companies to bring in the best and brightest is not the solution and will be a lose-lose situation for everyone—growth will slow as companies find it harder to recruit, meaning lower revenue for the Treasury.”

Clearly, there is a warning there.

I held a meeting in my constituency for concerned EU nationals. This was not about scaremongering, but about reassuring people. That meeting was completely sold out. It was packed to the rafters with people who were looking for some reassurance that they would be able to stay.

I wish to use my remaining time by quoting from a local woman of Polish extraction. Paulina Duncan is a UK citizen and a Pole. She said:

“Maybe I can summarise some of the comments I got from people when I initiated the discussion on the Poles in Inverness Facebook group over the weekend. I did it to find out what people think. I also went to the Polish delicatessen to chat to people there. Without any doubt, the common theme appearing in people’s comments was uncertainty and confusion about their future. There was also a lack of trust in the assurances from the
I wish to talk a little bit about why there are parts of this country, my own included, where we have got migration badly wrong, making debates such as this too shrill, too partisan and frankly sometimes too difficult to attract genuine contributions. With hindsight, the expansion of Europe to far poorer economies than our own was inevitably going to draw large numbers of people to areas where labour was abundant and very often casual. The Government of the day bungled the figures; we did not see changes coming and we failed to invest in local public services to keep pace with demands for schools, hospitals, GPs, and even housing and roads.

Today, while Boston still needs the bypass that has been on the drawing board for 100 years, schools have caught up but the NHS has not, and that raises tensions and causes debates such as this. No longer required to have a job before travelling to the UK, many people were tempted by inaccurate representations of life in the UK, and found themselves doing desperately hard work in freezing fields before returning home to a rented room unfit for human habitation in which they were allowed to occupy the bed only when it was their turn. Boston’s work in tackling rogue landlords has been rightly lauded in this House, but migration has worsened a problem that the Government should have foreseen. The consequences of those poor housing conditions has led to tensions, such as street drinking, antisocial behaviour and violent crime. Some Bostonians ask what those add to an historic town that was once a port second only to London.

Fast forward to 2016 and Boston is called—wrongly in my view—the least integrated town in the country by Policy Exchange. That report is wrong because it does not measure recent work done on street drinking, rogue landlords, and community integration, but it is talking about a real problem. Some constituents have asked me why everyone should be allowed to stay.

The solution to these issues is not to blindly pretend that every aspect of Boston or Britain is either better or worse for migration. There are a host of opportunities that we must seize and a host of nettles that we must grasp if we are ever to make these debates more sensible. We should depoliticise debates such as this and treat people like people.

I want to close by reading a few comments that were posted on my own Facebook wall. I went to see a superb new agricultural development that will create around 100 new jobs. Underneath the photographs some of my constituents wrote: “We all know who will be filling the labour requirements here”; “We shall see how many locals get a job”; “They don’t employ English. I got told that when I went for a job, so I didn’t even get an application form so it won’t be local people.”

When we get immigration wrong, we divide our country, we divide our towns and we foster radical parties that bring out the worst in good people. We end up having debates such as this. There is no easy way to encourage integration, especially when predominantly young men work in my constituency’s fields, largely in groups from their own countries, and go out in their precious leisure time with little motivation to integrate. But if we are to sensibly conclude debates such as this, we should have a care to those concerns just as much as we do to the rights of migrant workers, whether we are speaking of a Briton in Spain or a Lithuanian in Boston.
3.29 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): It has been 118 days since the EU referendum—118 days of blunders, slap-downs, in-fighting and conflicting statements from this UK Government. It is a case of life imitating art, as this shambolic response from the UK Government is more akin to a plot line from “The Thick of It” than a co-ordinated response to a deeply challenging and serious situation. It would be laughable if the consequences of Tory Brexit were not quite so serious.

It might be 118 days of in-fighting and a failure to govern, but it has also been 118 days when 3 million of our citizens do not know what the future holds for them or their families. Since 23 June, 3 million EU citizens, who pay an estimated £14.7 billion in income tax and national insurance contributions, have been referred to as “bargaining chips” in a Tory game that no one ever wanted to play in the first place.

But this is not a game and our EU-born nationals are not “bargaining chips”, “pawns” or “playing cards”. They are our wives, our husbands, our neighbours, co-workers, doctors, nurses, teachers and our friends. Instead of throwing fuel on the fire and making a very worrying situation for them even worse, this Government should be doing all they can to provide the assurance to the 3 million EU citizens in the UK that their future is secure here.

This debate says a lot about what kind of country we are. It might be an inconvenience for a few in the Brexiteer camp to think of the UK as a diverse country, but that is exactly what we are. We are better as a country because of the 57,000 NHS staff who were born elsewhere in the EU. Many sectors of our economy are world-leading not in spite of EU workers, but because of their expertise and skills. *Times Higher Education* highlighted how UK universities are world-leading, and this is in no small part because of the excellent level of teaching and research that EU nationals provide.

The Prime Minister’s short-sighted refusal to provide our EU nationals with the assurance that they are entitled to represents a slap in the face despite their hard work and the contribution they have made to our society.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Gavin Newlands: Not right now.

The UK Government may want to pretend that nothing will change, but the fact is that everything has changed for our EU nationals following the Brexit vote. Many are starting to think again about the country in which they have invested so much time and effort. Agnieszka from the Renfrewshire Polish Association, whom I met a few weeks ago, shared her concerns and those of many members of her group not only about the result of the referendum, but about some of the divisive rhetoric since. However, she felt somewhat sheltered from this by living in Scotland, with the different approach taken by the Scottish Government.

It is not only the failure to give assurances that is problematic. The statements and speeches at the Conservative party conference caused many EU nationals to consider their future. The new Home Secretary seems to share her predecessor’s bleak vision of reducing migration to tens of thousands and sees Brexit as one means of achieving this, refusing to recognise that 78% of working-age EU citizens in the UK are in work, compared with around 74% of UK nationals. It is economic vandalism of the highest order for the Home Secretary not to give these hard-working individuals the right to live and work in the UK, all with the aim of achieving the right-wing holy grail of reducing immigration.

Adding fuel to the fire, the Home Secretary expressed her desire to implement a system which requires companies to compile lists of foreign workers which would be used to “name and shame” those who employ large numbers of foreign workers. It is not the companies that should be placed in any wall of shame. The only person who should be ashamed is the Home Secretary for managing to propose a policy which even UKIP says goes too far.

Following a poisonous Brexit campaign, which has helped to create the environment in England and Wales for an increase in racially or religiously aggravated offences, a responsible Government would be praising and thanking EU nationals for the contribution that they make to our communities and assuring them of their right to stay. This UK Government have singularly failed to do so. The contrast could not be any sharper north of the border. Whereas the Prime Minister has remained silent and allowed her “hard Brexit” colleagues to describe EU nationals as “bargaining chips”, Nicola Sturgeon has shown compassionate leadership and adopted a positive and inclusive approach, and has repeatedly reassured those EU nationals who have made Scotland their home that Scotland is and will continue to be their home.

Economically, socially, culturally and morally the UK Government should do the correct thing today and offer a cast-iron guarantee to all those who have made the UK their home. That is a call that the Scottish Parliament, wider civil society, the business sector and EU nationals have all made to the Prime Minister.

Scotland voted overwhelmingly to remain in the EU and to reject the narrow-minded politics of the UKIP-Tory right-wing alliance. Those votes and those voters need to be respected, so the Government should stop playing games, end the xenophobia, lead for all our citizens, back this motion and categorically state to EU nationals that their future lies here and their residency status will be protected.

3.35 pm

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): I have listened to the debate with considerable interest. I have found it particularly interesting—and slightly nauseating actually—to hear from Members of the Scottish National party, who drape themselves in a cloak of moral certainty, as if to cast aspersions on Conservative Members’ motivations and desire to foster good community relations. The Conservative Government and my constituents, who voted overwhelmingly to leave the European Union, are not racists. May I repeat that for the benefit of SNP Members? It is not a racist campaign. This notion that, somehow, the Brexit vote was fuelled by xenophobia,
that the people in the SNP are on the side of the angels, and that everyone who opposes them—everyone who has ever argued against them—is in a benighted cave of their own is completely ridiculous. Frankly, it is embarrassing; it insults the intelligence of people in this House for SNP Members to suggest that everyone else is xenophobic and that they alone are the guardians of moral virtue. [*Interruption.*] They may not have said it, but everything they have ever said on this issue implies exactly that: they seize the moral high ground and they proceed to lecture us, and those of us on the Government Benches have had enough of it.

Now, let me address the issue at hand. Nobody has suggested in the debate that migration is a bad thing in Britain. Many of the people who have spoken—myself included—are themselves the children or grandchildren of immigrants; they fully understand, and are fully conscious of, the benefits of migration to this country. The issue is simply a narrow one about the negotiation and the nature of the deal with the EU going forward. It is entirely legitimate for a Government, ahead of negotiations, to say, as the Government have done, that our aim is to guarantee and secure the rights of EU nationals in this country. That is what the Government have done, and it is entirely reasonable for them to have done that; in fact, nobody in the House, I think, would suggest that that was a bad thing.

The Government have said that that is the aim. Now, if it were to happen, for whatever reason—I am not prejudging this in any way—that an EU Government questioned the rights of British citizens working in their country, circumstances would of course have changed, and we could well be in a different situation.

Dr Philippa Whitford: Will the hon. Gentleman clarify whether, if there were difficulties with a country, he is suggesting that the Government would take reprisals?

_Kwasi Kwarteng:_ I am not suggesting anything of the kind. What I am saying is that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Braintree (James Cleverly) suggested, it is naive simply to give cast-iron guarantees at this point. I suspect that these guarantees will be given further along the line and that it is very likely we will reach a situation where everyone is happy and everyone can stay. However, at this moment—in October 2016—it would be a little premature, perhaps, to give those undertakings.

_James Berry:_ In Kingston, as in Spelthorne, foreign-born people are welcome. We very much value their contribution; we want them to stay. However, is my hon. Friend aware that not one EU Head of State has given the unilateral and unequivocal guarantee that SNP Members are asking for in the debate?

_Kwasi Kwarteng:_ My hon. Friend is exactly right. I regret to say this, but if one has been following the foreign news reports of the statements made by Jean-Claude Juncker and other people, it is clear that there is an air of menace around. I am not saying that it is universally expressed, but there is a view that somehow the British people acted defiantly or insolently towards the EU and that we should be punished as a consequence of the vote on 23 June. I regret having to say this, but it is a fact that people on the continent in high positions in the EU have made such statements.

Mr Baron: Many of us, leavers and remainers, have great sympathy with the position expressed in the motion, but where we part company is with the final six words “should the UK exit the EU.”

_Brexit means Brexit,_ and that is pure mischief-making by the SNP. That is why a lot of us will not be supporting the motion.

_Kwasi Kwarteng:_ I think there are a number of reasons—

Mike Weir:—

_Kwasi Kwarteng:_ I have given way enough, and I want to proceed with the rest of my remarks.

Clearly, we are all in a mood of beneficence, good will and co-operation towards migrants from the EU and from outside the EU. The modern economy that we foster in Britain is dependent on a large degree of migration—we accept that. What we do not accept is the free movement of people unilaterally across the EU. Many Conservative Members do not think that is the right way to proceed. At this stage, before we have even entered into a negotiation, it would be premature to give the cast-iron guarantees that we all want to reach at the end. We all want to get to the stage where we can give these guarantees, but for as long as the rights of British citizens in the EU have not been guaranteed, it would be premature for a British Government to do so. [*Interruption.*] I can hear the right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) chuntering from a sedentary position. He has spent many years in this House. He can ask to intervene in the customary fashion, if he wishes to do so, and I am quite willing to give way.

_Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP):_ Can the hon. Gentleman explain the contrast between the 42% rise in hate crime in England in the immediate aftermath of Brexit and a 15% fall in similar statistics in Scotland?

_Kwasi Kwarteng:_ I would not presume to talk about the earthly paradise otherwise known as Scotland. I am not going to make any statements about what is going on in Scotland, because I do not have the expertise to do so. However, I do regret the assumption that somehow the Brexit vote was driven by xenophobia and racism, and that the right hon. Gentleman’s party is completely absolved from that.

_Alex Salmond rose—

_Kwasi Kwarteng:_ I will allow the right hon. Gentleman to intervene once more, and then I want to wrap up.

_Alex Salmond:_ This is not the hon. Gentleman’s responsibility, but he will remember the “Breaking Point” poster during the campaign—not the campaign that he was part of, but it was there for people to see. Does he believe that a poster like that, with Mr Farage in front of it, would tend to be the sort of thing that might incite hate crime?
Kwasi Kwarteng: For the record, I want to state that I denounced that particular intervention from Mr Farage.

Of course we accept the benefits of migration, and of course we want to preserve and guarantee the rights of EU migrants, but today, when the rights of British citizens in the EU have not been guaranteed, it would be premature to give the guarantees that SNP Members seek.

3.43 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Yesterday evening, I found myself experiencing a very strange sensation that I had not experienced before, because when I started to read the motion tabled by the SNP, I found myself largely agreeing with it—that is, up until the last six words: “should the UK exit the EU.”

Those six words betray the real reason this motion has been brought to this House—not primarily out of a concern for EU nationals living in the UK, but to continue the referendum debate once again.

Mike Weir rose—

Steve Double: I am not going to take an intervention yet.

It has become quite clear, as this debate has gone on, that that is what this is actually about. It is tough for SNP Members having been on the wrong side of public opinion three times in a row in referendums. I would have thought that they had learned the lesson by now that they tend to be on the wrong side and that it is time to give up, yet they seem to be keen on even more referendums.

The fact is that we are leaving the EU. The British people have made a decision and given their very clear instruction to this place, and we will be leaving the EU.

There is no “should” about it; it is a question of when we leave the EU.

As I have said, I largely agree with the spirit of the motion, apart from that bit and perhaps one other minor point. The 3 million EU nationals who have made their home in this country, and who are largely here contributing positively to our nation by working and paying their taxes, are very welcome and we want them to stay. No Conservative Member has suggested anything other than that we want those EU nationals to be able to remain in this country and to live, work and contribute to our economy for as long as they wish to.

No one has suggested otherwise, and it is disingenuous to suggest that Conservatives have any other desire or motivation.

In my constituency, EU migrants make a huge contribution to our economy. They work in tourism, in bars, restaurants and hotels. They work in agriculture, often seasonally, helping to bring in Cornwall’s variety of excellent produce. They also work in the processing of our excellent seafood and dairy products. They play an absolutely crucial role in our society, and we want them to continue to be able to do so. The Government have made it very clear that that is their intention, but I absolutely support their position that we should not give a cast-iron guarantee on the matter until other EU countries reciprocate. We would be doing a disservice to the British citizens who live in other EU countries if we did so.

Let us remember that our first responsibility is to British citizens, and we should be looking out for their future and wellbeing just as much as anyone else’s. It is absolutely right that we continue that approach and seek those assurances because, as other right hon and hon. Members have pointed out, those assurances have not yet been given. I am absolutely confident that once we are given them, we will reciprocate and guarantee the future of EU nationals who live and work here.

Another point about the motion is that it refers to “all” EU citizens. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper), who is no longer in the Chamber, pointed out earlier, there are some EU nationals whom we probably do not wish to keep. By breaking our laws, convicted criminals have abused the hospitality and the welcome that we have given them. It is absolutely right that once they have served their sentences, we should seek to return them to their country of origin. The world “all” is too open, because we do not necessarily want all EU citizens to remain.

Dr Philippa Whitford: May I clarify that the hon. Gentleman wants to guarantee that the various crooks settled on the Costa del Sol will stay there?

Steve Double: I suggest that if those people have broken laws, it is for the Spanish Government to decide what to do with them at the end of their stay at the hospitality of the Spanish Government. The position in this country is absolutely right.

Much has been said by the SNP about the rhetoric that is stirring up uncertainty, but I suggest that such motions create uncertainty by raising the issue when the Government have made absolutely clear their intention and desire for EU citizens to be able to remain in this country.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP) rose—

Steve Double: I will not give way again.

By continuing this debate and continuing to stir up such uncertainty, we are actually creating and perpetuating uncertainty. It is absolutely right for the Government to hold the line that we continue to wait for a similar assurance from other countries and that, once it is given, we will be more than happy to reciprocate and guarantee the future of EU nationals and their right to stay in this country. For those reasons, much as I agree with the spirit of the motion, I will not be able to support it later today.

3.49 pm

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the powerful speech of my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double). I, too, agree with the first part of the motion, because I certainly recognise and appreciate the contributions that workers from the EU have made in this country. Some key businesses and public sector services—many hon. Members on both sides of the House have identified them in their own constituencies—are vitally served by EU workers. In my own constituency of Bexhill and Battle, where the proportion of older people is particularly high, none is more key than our care home sector, and we would be in a very difficult position without those EU workers. Of 35 care homes inspected, only nine were
rated good, and the rest required improvement or were inadequate, so where would such homes be without key workers from the EU?

I maintain that during the past six years the Government have provided the economic base for many workers to come to Britain and make a great success of themselves. More jobs have been created in the UK during that period than in the rest of the EU put together. Those individuals have come here with great aspiration and a desire to work, as well as endeavour and enterprise. It is in their DNA, and it is certainly in the DNA of my party and my hon. Friends on the Government Benches. In that sense, we certainly do not need any lectures on our support for EU citizens.

I have concerns about the second part of the motion in reference to the future, and I therefore certainly cannot support it. As colleagues on the Government Benches have pointed out, there is a typo in the motion: it says “should” the UK exit the EU, rather than “when” it does so. I did not vote to leave the EU, but in my view, now that the decision has been made, we need to embrace the opportunity and get on with it.

I made this point earlier, but I find it frustrating that there are so many debates in this House about the pitfalls, that we are holding up Ministers and preventing them from getting on with the job and getting it done. There is a certain irony in my position. [ Interruption. ] The right hon. Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) is chuckling. He, like me, was in Strasbourg last week, where we were working with our European partners, only for us to come back to the House for a debate about Europe. We could have been in Europe, making friends and building relationships, which would be a better use of our time.

During the last week of the referendum campaign, I visited 25 schools, and I visited another 10 during my own party conference. Teachers and, indeed, pupils consistently asked me questions about the right to remain, to which I made the point that in time, once this was settled, should we leave the EU, I would imagine that we need to embrace the opportunity and get on with it.

I should point out that people who have been here for five years already have the right to remain. Indeed, by the time we exit the EU, those who have come here relatively recently will have reached that five-year point. I therefore find much of this debate slightly false.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that point. When constituents who are concerned and need reassurance come to my surgeries—3,000 eastern Europeans live in my constituency—I make the point he has just made. Five out of every six EU nationals living in this country either already have the right to remain or will have it by the time we leave the EU. The 2.9 million EU nationals living in the UK today have nothing to worry about.

Huw Merriman: My hon. Friend makes a fine point. Like me, he is a lawyer. I am not sure how many of the 1.2 million UK citizens resident in the EU have the same right to support those 1.2 million people, it is even more imperative to ensure that they have the same right to remain as the five out of six EU citizens working here to whom he refers.
hospital, in the shops on the Promenade and in our bars and restaurants, and the overwhelming majority of them do so quietly, diligently and uncomplainingly. Their work ethic and “can do” attitude are an object lesson. They seek nothing more than the right to stand on their own two feet. The message that must ring out from this Chamber then is that those who have come and built their lives here are welcome, valued and respected.

In that context, it is—unusually, perhaps—hard to disagree with the SNP sentiment, but I fear that the motion appears to be political. I am sorry to say that it appears to be mischief-making at best and irresponsible at worst. I say that with some diffidence, because much of what comes from SNP Front-Bench spokesmen bears listening to. I have concerns about the motion, however.

First, as my hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick) indicated, the fact is that by the time Brexit happens—I was a remainer—the overwhelming majority of EU nationals will have the right to remain in the United Kingdom because they will have indefinite leave to remain.

Dr Philippa Whitford: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Alex Chalk: Let me just develop my point and then I will come to the hon. Lady.

Secondly, let us be clear: EU nationals are not going to be required to leave. It is not going to happen. I would not vote for it. The House would not vote for it. It would be morally bankrupt and economically ruinous. There is therefore a danger that the motion unnecessarily sets hares running. It stokes fear when none need exist.

The reality is that the duty of any British Government—this is plain as a pikestaff—is to protect the rights of their citizens. The SNP’s contributions have been disappointing because they have not acknowledged the fair point that 1 million British citizens living abroad want reassurance, too, because—guess what?—they have families, jobs and livelihoods that they do not want to lose. It is a fair point that no EU Head of State has provided our nationals with that reassurance, including Scottish nationals.

Joanna Cherry: If the rights of British citizens living abroad were so important to the Conservative party, why did it not give them a vote in the EU referendum?

Alex Chalk: I am always grateful for interventions, but with respect that is a bit of a distraction. That is not what we are focusing on here. We are focusing on the rights of British nationals overseas and EU nationals in the UK. It is wrong for us to be sidetracked in that way.

The SNP is right that this has to be resolved. I am concerned—I am sure some of my colleagues are, too—about this dragging on. My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) made a fair point about the Council summit tomorrow. I hope the opportunity will be taken to discuss the matter with Heads of State. Make no mistake, we are dealing with people here. It is incumbent upon Heads of State in Europe and our own Government to grasp the nettle and put the issue to bed, but, for the reasons I set out, I am not in a position to support the motion.

4.1 pm

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): As I rise, I look across at Government Members who are probably thinking that I am a principal scaremongerer. I was the first on the SNP Benches to raise the issue of EU nationals in this House. I raised it before the referendum vote when, because of the leave campaign, two of my constituents, originally from Germany, Thomas and Elke Westen, said to me that such was their concern about the way immigration was being discussed they were leaving the UK. They did not want to be abroad for the vote. They had been denied a vote by the Government. They were allowed to have a vote in the referendum on Scotland, but not on the European referendum. They said that if there was going to be a vote to leave the EU they would choose to leave and go to an EU country. I have tried all I can to persuade them to stay, but in the past two weeks they have put their house up for sale, they are closing their business and they are seeking to move back. That is not scaremongering. That is recognising the real effect on human beings living in our country.

Alex Salmond: Throughout the debate there has been a refrain from those on the Tory Benches that there is nothing really to worry about. The Chancellor has just been questioned by the Treasury Committee about this exact point. He said he hoped there would be an agreement, but then went on to say that if UK and EU failed to reach such an agreement, then under a migration scheme that was unilateral we would have choices to make about how we would choose to deal with those EU nationals in the UK. It would be a matter for the UK to decide. It is hardly a wonder that people are frightened when that is what the Chancellor says.

Roger Mullin: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. That harks back to the opening remarks of the Immigration Minister, who is no longer in the Chamber. At one stage in his speech he was trying to provide reassurance and say there was no uncertainty, but he also said that he was not in a position to set out a definitive position. Why not? He went on to say that it was because it would not be good negotiating practice.

Alan Brown: My hon. Friend correctly says that EU nationals were allowed to vote in the Scottish referendum, but did not get a vote in the EU referendum. Another symbol that the UK Government are throwing down is that they are now changing legislation so that British nationals living abroad get a vote for life. Does my hon. Friend agree that this is another clear national divide?

Roger Mullin: I agree entirely.

I want to move on to tackle a question raised by Government Members, who asked us whether we were not also concerned about the rights of British citizens living abroad. Well, I can tell them that I am. I will tell them who first raised this concern with me: Tracy de Jongh Eglinton, who lives in the Netherlands. She contacted me some months ago. What worried her was that when the UK Government were saying “This is negotiable”, they were saying that it was not just EU nationals’ positions here that were negotiable, but British citizens’ rights abroad, too. The UK Government are the ones who have created this insecurity for EU nationals here and for British nationals overseas.
When negotiations are entered into, uncertainty is automatically created. It cannot be otherwise, because negotiations involve the trading of positions. I have a question and I hope that the Minister will be able to answer it in his reply: what is it that he is willing to trade away in these negotiations? He must have something tradable in mind; otherwise, there would be no negotiations. Negotiations do not have to be “symmetrical” where the citizenship status here has to be negotiated with respect to people in a similar position elsewhere. It is possible to have asymmetrical negotiations, which would mean trying to secure the rights of British citizens by utilising economic levers, for example, so there is absolutely no moral justification and no negotiating justification for the uncertainty that this Government have created both for EU nationals and for British citizens overseas.

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a fantastic speech. The motion is quite simple: it is about EU nationals retaining their current rights. When Conservative Members applaud the sentiment behind the motion but say they are realising their current rights. When Conservative Members to say, “They should not be frightened and they should not be uncertain, but by the way, we are putting you into the negotiation pot none the less.” That is not reassurance. It is perfectly understandable that people are feeling uncertain and insecure about their rights.

My hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) put that point wonderfully when she talked about her own husband, a doctor and a fine man—I have met him—who has been working here for 30 years. With his background, he is not going to be easily scared or put off, but there is uncertainty in his mind as well as in thousands upon thousands of people’s minds.

I held a meeting in my constituency, and 40 EU citizens came along to talk about their anxieties. These are real anxieties, and the Government should do the right thing. The Minister should stand up now and guarantee all those people’s rights in our country.

Roger Mullin: I agree entirely.

It is not enough to say that we want people to stay here; it is more about allowing those people to have rights. The problem at the moment is that many of the rights that individuals hold in our society are rights that they have because they are EU citizens and fall under EU law. It is under EU law that they have a right to work here, the right to retire here, the right to a vote in some elections, the right to access welfare and the right to access health services. These are EU-guaranteed rights. We want to see those rights enshrined in law here.

Alex Salmond: The Chancellor continues to caw the feet from the Tory case as presented in this Chamber. He has now said to the Select Committee that there will be no migration curbs on bankers under Brexit, so the bankers will be fine, but my hon. Friend’s constituents will be struggling.

Roger Mullin: I thank my right hon. Friend for that quite astonishing point. Does that not speak to the morality of Conservative Members?

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman makes a good point, but there is an additional right that is important while these negotiations are going on. It is the right to safety, particularly when we look at what has happened to members of the Polish community, which seems to be taking the brunt of all this anti-European sentiment. Surely they have a right to reassurance here.

Roger Mullin: The hon. Gentleman makes a wonderful point. I have been in discussions in my own constituency with a body called the migrant forum, the majority of whose members are of Polish extraction. They have been coming to me with concerns, wanting to find ways to gain reassurance. It is not good enough for some Conservative Members to say, “They should not be frightened and they should not be uncertain, but by the way, we are putting you into the negotiation pot none the less.” That is not reassurance. It is perfectly understandable that people are feeling uncertain and insecure about their rights.

My hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) put that point wonderfully when she talked about her own husband, a doctor and a fine man—I have met him—who has been working here for 30 years. With his background, he is not going to be easily scared or put off, but there is uncertainty in his mind as well as in thousands upon thousands of people’s minds.

I held a meeting in my constituency, and 40 EU citizens came along to talk about their anxieties. These are real anxieties, and the Government should do the right thing. The Minister should stand up now and guarantee all those people’s rights in our country.

4.10 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): I congratulate the Scottish National party on securing the debate. We have been dealing with a very important issue: the status of EU nationals living in the UK following the EU referendum and the decision of the British people to leave the EU. I am very glad that Parliament has had a chance to debate the issue in detail, and I commend the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) and the hon. Member for Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath (Roger Mullin) for bringing it to the attention of the House. I am also delighted to face across the Dispatch Box, for the first time, the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Paul Blomfield). We have served together on Select Committees in the past, and I think that we share a number of very similar values. I look forward to working with him on future debates.

Having listened carefully to what has been said today, I would say that that tone is important. As we were told by the hon. Member for Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey (Drew Hendry), we should be here to provide reassurance, and I hope that I shall be able to provide some now.

We have heard a number of excellent speeches. It was great to hear from my hon. Friends the Members for Braintree (James Cleverly), for Cardiff North (Craig Williams), for Spelthorne (Kwasi Kwarteng), for Monmouth (David T. C. Davies) and for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman). My hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness made some thoughtful comments about immigration issues, which were picked up by my hon. Friend the Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman). That is, of course, a debate for another time. I think it important for us to focus today on the rights of EU nationals, and on the point that so many of my hon. Friends have made about the rights that we must secure for UK nationals as well.

Let me begin by making it absolutely clear that the Government want to protect the status of EU nationals who are resident in the UK. The only circumstances in which that would not be possible would be those in which British citizens’ rights in other EU member states were not protected in return, and, like my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, I find it hard—nearly impossible—to imagine that scenario arising.
As Members in all parts of the House have made clear today, EU citizens make an invaluable contribution to our country, and the Government welcome that contribution. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk), I recognise it from my own constituency. We all agree that steps must be taken to guarantee the status of the EU nationals who have chosen to build a life here in the UK. The House clearly feels strongly about the matter, and the Government will seek a swift solution when discussions with the EU begin.

That brings me to my second point. While it is a Government priority to address this issue as soon as possible, the fact remains that we need an agreement in order to do so. It would be inappropriate and irresponsible to set out unilateral positions at this stage. Just last week, the House voted on a motion which provided for parliamentary scrutiny of the Brexit process but included the provision that we should not do anything to undermine the Government’s negotiating position. The Government understand the importance of giving certainty to EU citizens who have moved to build a life in the UK, but we are not able to set out a unilateral position now, ahead of negotiations; that must be done following negotiation and agreement with the EU. Doing otherwise would risk adversely affecting our negotiating position, and hence the position of British citizens who have chosen to build a life, with their families, in other countries. My hon. Friends the Members for Braintree and for Bexhill and Battle made that point very clearly.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Walker: I will not give way for the time being.

The right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) created an entirely new area of fear by talking about some kind of trade-off in terms of numbers. It was the first time that I had ever heard such a suggestion, and I assure the right hon. Gentleman that it is certainly not something that we have been contemplating.

The Government want the same fair treatment for British and EU citizens. That is a sensible position to take, and the Government are confident that they will be able to achieve their aim in agreement with the EU. We have already made it clear that this is a priority for negotiations. Only last week, the excellent Leader of the Opposition in Scotland was pressing the case on the open door of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union.

This brings me to my final key point in this section: the status of EU nationals living in the UK will not change while the UK remains a member of the EU. It is important to remember that we remain a full member of the EU with all the rights and responsibilities of EU membership until the end of the article 50 process.

We have heard contributions from Members on both sides of the House and of this debate who are married to EU citizens, and I commend them for their statements. They raised real concerns about EU nationals and their status, but it appears to me that there is near unanimity in this House on providing reassurance. We should all be seeking to do that in our comments.

Dr Philippa Whitford: Does the hon. Gentleman not recognise that platitudinous reassurance is not real reassurance? Reassurance has been given to students; why not give it to resident EU nationals? Otherwise it will be three years from the vote until we know what is going to happen.

Mr Walker: As I have already pointed out, during those three years it is the Government’s absolute intention to secure the rights of EU nationals in the UK and UK nationals in the EU as early in the negotiations as we can.

I think that is reassurance. Let me be clear that EU nationals and citizens can continue to live, work and study here in the UK under existing EU law. They will also be able to be accompanied or joined by family members. I know the whole House will agree that it is important that we make this clear and continue to provide reassurance to all our constituents.

Alex Salmond: I understand what the Minister says and it all sounds very good, but why was the Chancellor this afternoon able to give specific assurance about bankers that apparently the Minister is unable to give to the rest of our EU citizens?

Mr Walker: We should not be trying to create an atmosphere of fear. We should set out the reassurances I have given and will continue to give.

In conclusion, EU nationals can have the Government’s complete reassurance that there is no immediate change to their right to enter, work, study and live in the UK as a result of the EU referendum. I reassure EU citizens in Scotland and up and down the country generally that we recognise the enormous contribution they make to our economy, our health service, our schools, our care sector and our communities. We will act fairly towards them as we expect other EU countries to act fairly to our citizens living there.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP) rose—

Mr Walker: I will not give way again.

We have heard from all parts of the UK and all sides of the referendum debate today, and as we move forward we must seek to bring the whole country together. Given that the UK and the EU would like to maintain a close and friendly relationship, the Government are confident that we will work together and that EU and British citizens will be protected through a reciprocal agreement. Because this motion fails to acknowledge that, and because of its technical failings which were pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Immigration, my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) and my hon. Friends the Members for Braintree and for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), I urge Members on both sides of the House to reject it.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 250, Noes 293.

Division No. 69]

[4.18 pm

AYES

Abrahams, Debbie  Alexander, Heidi  Ali, Rushanara

Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina  Anderson, Mr David  Arkless, Richard

Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena  Ashworth, Jonathan
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blenkinsop, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Boswell, Philip
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Cherry, Joanna
Chidwy, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Crausby, Mr David
Crawley, Angela
Creasy, Stella
Cruddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
David, Wayne
Dey, Martyn
De Piero, Gloria
Debbonaire, Thangam
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Dowd, Peter
Dromey, Jack
Dugher, Michael
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Ferrier, Margaret
Field, rh Frank
Filipczak, Jim
Fiell, Robert
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Furniss, Gill
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gibson, Patricia
Glindon, Mary
Goldsmith, Zac
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Henderson, Melanie
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hermon, Lady
Hillier, Megan
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoey, Kate
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Mr Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hunt, Tristram
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, rh Alan
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Mr Kevin
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keeley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Kerevan, George
Kerr, Calum
Kinahan, Danny
Kyle, Peter
Lammy, rh Mr David
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan
Maclaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khalid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Gordon
Maskell, Rachel
Mathias, Mr Tania
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCag, Callum
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stewart Malcolm
McDonald, Stuart C.
McDonnell, rh John
McPadden, rh Mr Pat
McCarron, Natalie
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McLaughlin, Anne
McMahon, Jim
Mearns, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Dr Paul
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Mulholland, Greg
Mullin, Roger
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Nicolson, John
O’Hara, Brendan
Osborn, Dr Peter
Onwurah, Chi
Osamar, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Owen, Albert
Paterson, Steven
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Pugh, John
Qureshi, Yasmin
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Jamie
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Marie
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robertson, rh Angus
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Rotheram, Steve
Salmond, rh Alex
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Spellar, rh Mr John
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Tami, Mark
Thewliss, Alison
Thomas, Mr Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thompson, Michelle
Timm, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Umunna, Mr Chuka
Vaz, rh Keith
Watson, Mr Tom
Weir, Mike
West, Catherine
Whiteford, Dr Eilidh
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
William, Hywel
Williams, Mr Mark
Wilson, Corri
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr David
Wishart, Pete
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Owen Thompson and Marion Fellows

NOES

Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allan, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard

Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Blackman, Bob
Blackwood, Nicola
Boles, Nick
Bone, Mr Peter
Borwick, Victoria
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Mr Graham
Brazier, Mr Julian
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, Robert

The tellers for the Ayes are Owen Thompson and Marion Fellows.
Question accordingly negatived.

Tellers for the Noes:

Wragg, William
Wood, Mike
Wilson, Sammy
Wilson, Mr Rob
Williams, Craig
Wiggin, Bill
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wilson, Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wragg, William
Wright, rh Jeremy

**Tellers for the Ayes:**

Christopher Pincher and
Chris Heaton-Harris
Speaker's Statement
(Select Committee Chairs)

Mr Speaker: I can now announce the results of the Select Committee Chair elections held today. Nominations for the five vacant Select Committee Chairs closed yesterday and elections were held by secret ballot today.

No ballot was necessary for the International Trade Committee, for which a single nomination had been received. The Chair of that Committee will be Angus Brendan MacNeil.

In the four contested elections, a total of 546 ballot papers were submitted, the ballots being counted under the alternative vote system. The following candidates were elected:

- Culture, Media and Sport Committee: Damian Collins
- Exiting the European Union Committee: Hilary Benn
- Home Affairs Committee: Yvette Cooper
- Science and Technology Committee: Stephen Metcalfe

The full breakdown of voting in each contest indicating the votes attributable to each candidate after each redistribution of the votes of eliminated candidates is set out in a paper available from the Vote Office. The Members so elected take up their positions immediately, except in the case of the Chairs of the Exiting the European Union and International Trade Committees, who will formally take up their positions when their Committees have been nominated by the House. I warmly congratulate all the right hon. and hon. Members concerned. I should like to thank—on behalf of the House—all the candidates who participated in the elections, and I know that the House will want to join me in thanking very warmly all the staff of the House who so efficiently facilitated the conduct of the elections.

House of Lords Reform and Size of the House of Commons

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retirement, whereby peers retire after 20 years—this would be based not on age, but on length of service. That would easily take care of 212-plus peers and the House of Lords would be smaller than House of Commons.

Pete Wishart: I say to the hon. Gentleman, whose interest in this issue I recognise, that that would be a start but that much more needs to be done to address the anomalies of the political circus down the corridor. I take the point made by the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant). He is right to say that there are people serving in the Lords who are technocrats and the great and the good. These people have been appointed by the independent Lords Appointments Commission, but they are a tiny minority. The House of Lords tries to project this image of itself as inviting in the great and the good to help us with our legislation, but the overwhelming majority of the membership of that House is appointed by a Prime Minister from the list supplied by the leaders of the UK parties. That is why we find the cronies, the placemen, the donors and the failed or former MPs.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): I find myself discombobulated in agreeing with some of the hon. Gentleman's sentiments. Do I infer from his comments that if the other place were to take a decision in the future with which he agreed but then set its face against the Salisbury convention and a commitment enunciated in our party's manifesto in government, he would not support the Lords and would reiterate his view that peers are unelected and that they lack democratic accountability and authority?

Pete Wishart: I would support Attila the Hun, Genghis Khan and their many hordes if it helped to defeat this Government. I have no issue or problem with supporting the House of Lords when it gets something right, but that does not make it any better on these issues. I have sensed the pain in the past few months of so many Conservative Back Benchers who have looked at this place and got increasingly upset that the Lords has defied its will. This Government do not particularly like to be challenged, but the fact that they are being challenged by an unelected, undemocratic House is beginning to disturb the Conservative party, and so I say join us in dealing with this undemocratic disgrace.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): I agree that we should be doing something about the House of Lords quickly. I know that the hon. Gentleman is an intelligent character, so perhaps he can help me out with some maths. The current Prime Minister and the former Prime Minister have wanted to cut the number in this place from 650 to 600 to save £12 million, yet they have stuffed the other place, costing £34 million. To me, that sounds like a cost, not a saving.

Pete Wishart: The hon. Gentleman is spot on, although actually it is worse than that, as the last figures we have are for 2014-15, when the cost of the House of Lords was actually £100 million—that is what they are actually spending on it. Instead of reducing that, this Government's sole intention and ambition on the House of Lords is to continue to increase the size of that place.

Let us take a cursory look at our latest batch of new parliamentarians—the 16 new appointees from the former Prime Minister's resignation list. This list was oozing and dripping with patronage and cronynism. We now have 16 shiny new parliamentarians to welcome to these Houses of Parliament, but let us look at who they are. Thirteen of them are Conservative—[HON. MEMBERS: 'Hear, hear.'][H] Let me tell people exactly what they are like before they say that. Five of them were senior members of staff in the former Prime Minister's office, with one a former special adviser to that Prime Minister. One was a special adviser to the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. One is a Conservative treasurer who just so happened to have given the Conservative party millions and millions of pounds over the years. Curiously—this is the one that gets me—one is the former leader of the Conservative remain campaign, who, I suggest, is not getting a peerage for any great success that he has delivered to the Conservative party.

Michael Gove (Surrey Heath) (Con): I rise to correct the hon. Gentleman. The Conservative leader of the remain campaign is a she, not a he. If the hon. Gentleman professes to be an expert on appointments to that Chamber, it would at least be appropriate for him to recognise that it achieves gender balance as well as having many other virtues.

Pete Wishart: There are many things that can be defined as redeeming features, and that is one that I accept, so I thank the right hon. Gentleman for pointing it out.

The new parliamentarians of Great Britain are strangers to the ballot box, but very good friends of the former Prime Minister.

Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Following the right hon. Gentleman's point on gender balance, may I help the hon. Gentleman by saying that, among the hereditary peers, there are currently 91 men and one woman?

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): It seems to me that the Prime Minister has wanted to cut the House of Lords, but he has 16 new parliamentarians to welcome to these Houses of Parliament, but let us look at who they are. Thirteen of them are Conservative—[HON. MEMBERS: 'Hear, hear.'][H] Let me tell people exactly what they are like before they say that. Five of them were senior members of staff in the former Prime Minister's office, with one a former special adviser to that Prime Minister. One was a special adviser to the former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. One is a Conservative treasurer who just so happened to have given the Conservative party millions and millions of pounds over the years. Curiously—this is the one that gets me—one is the former leader of the Conservative remain campaign, who, I suggest, is not getting a peerage for any great success that he has delivered to the Conservative party.

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have when one of their number dies. The earls, the counts, the barons, the lords and the ladies of the land get together to replenish their numbers. It is the weirdest electorate in the world. It may be the poshest and most exclusive electorate that can be found anywhere, but at least there is that element of democracy in the House of Lords.

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Among the posh selectors was a group of three Liberal life peers who chose one of their number. On the point about bringing democracy to the Lords, would not a small improvement be a ballot of the life peers, so that we at least have a natural way of getting rid of some of them while perhaps injecting some democracy into their veins, despite them not liking it?

Pete Wishart: Only land-locked Lesotho has elders as a feature of its democracy. This is the mother of all parliaments for goodness’ sake, and we still have people here because of birthright! It is absurd.

Michael Gove: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Pete Wishart: I have given way to the right hon. Gentleman before. [Interruption.] Oh, well, I will give way.

Michael Gove: Once again, I will have to correct the hon. Gentleman on a point of fact. This is not the mother of all parliaments. The original phrase the “mother of parliaments” refers to this country, not to this institution, and the “mother of all” is a prefix associated with the Iraq war. If he is going to pack so many factual errors into his speech, how can we possibly take him seriously as a constitutional or any other sort of authority? He was a marvellous player and lyricist for Runrig, but as a constitutional theoretician, I am afraid that, sadly, he falls short.

Pete Wishart: On a positive note, I am very grateful that we have the right hon. Gentleman in this Chamber to correct me. I always thought that he had an issue with experts, but, clearly, he is a self-appointed one himself. We will let him get away with it just now.

John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): On that point, perhaps I can help my hon. Friend. The department of economics at Oxford has a breakdown of the average cost of each peer in the House of Lords. It is very interesting reading: £100,000 for Conservatives, £140,000 for Labour and £99,000 for Liberal Democrat Members of the House of Lords.

Pete Wishart: Again, that is probably average estimated figures.

There we have it. Those are the aristocratic Members of the House of Lords. Just to make it even more surreal—I think that somebody has mentioned this already—26 places are reserved for bishops in their cassocks. They are not just any ordinary bishops in their cassocks; they have to be Church of England bishops in their cassocks. Again, this is the only legislature in the world that has a place reserved for clerics other than the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The coup de grâce, the ultimate horror of the membership of the House of Lords, is not the aristocrats or the bishops. It is the fact that we still have 104 Liberal Democrat peers. Roundly rejected by the electorate, the Liberal Democrats are kept alive in that crypt on a political life support system. People of Britain, welcome to your legislators! We have aristocrats, bishops and unelected Liberal Democrats. Is that not a great contribution?

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): If the hon. Gentleman is serious about reducing the size of the House of Lords, as my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Mr Walker) mentioned a moment ago, has he thought of a system whereby we have indirect elections based on the number of votes cast in the general election, with each party having an electoral college, with perhaps a ceiling of 500 peers, as an interim measure? That would suit the hon. Gentleman’s party and it would remove the outrage of 104 Lib Dem peers in the House of Lords.

Pete Wishart: The hon. Gentleman makes a reasonable suggestion, but I am not going to suggest how we conclusively deal with the issue. All I am saying to the House today is that we must deal with it. We cannot continue to increase the numbers in the House of Lords while decreasing the numbers in this place. I would respect any suggestion that came forward, as long as it deals seriously with that.

While describing the other place and all its undemocratic horrors, we still have the audacity to lecture the developing world about the quality of its democracies. We have the gall to tick developing countries off about corruption, patronage and cronyism when we have a Chamber down the corridor that is appointed by a Prime Minister. How dare we suggest that to the developing world when we have such an absurd, chaotic system?

Because the House of Lords is a stranger to democracy, because it is in the hands of a small elite and because it is an appointed, created Parliament, there will always be a temptation to delve into the outer edges of corruptibility. The only qualifying characteristic and feature that some of the appointees seem to have is the ability to give large amounts of money to one of the main UK parties. This was tested to the limit by my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Mr MacNeil) when he raised the question of cash for honours, one of the biggest political scandals of the past decades, where we saw a sitting Prime Minister being questioned by the police and some of his key members of staff and fundraisers actually elected. That is what we have done. We have created a Chamber that is immensely corruptible, and we should take that on board.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I intend to vote for the hon. Gentleman’s motion this evening because I agree with much of what he is saying. He said that money was the only qualification. Does he accept that one of the other qualifications that appears to be gaining ground is to have been rejected by the electorate? On the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant), I was always a big supporter of the House of Lords because it was full of people who were the most eminent in society. Now it is becoming full of second-raters and people who have been rejected by the electorate. Perhaps that is why the Lib Dems are not represented in this debate—maybe they are embarrassed about their representatives down in the other place.
Pete Wishart: They should be thoroughly embarrassed about their membership there because it is the only thing that sustains them as a political force.

Albert Owen (Ynys Môn) (Lab): I will vote with the hon. Gentleman tonight and I think it is a good motion, but I am not certain where this will lead. He talks about a reduction in numbers. Would not the best course be to abolish the other place? I had the privilege in a previous Parliament of proposing that, so that we start from zero. Will the hon. Gentleman outline a plan to replace the House of Lords?

Pete Wishart: I shall suggest certain things that we could consider to replace it. The House of Lords is unreformable and there is nothing we could do with it. It has got out of control. It is like a huge undemocratic leviathan cloaked in ermine that would continue to feed on patronage and cronyism. It has very few redeemable features.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I, too, find myself entirely in agreement with the hon. Gentleman. Is not the real issue for constituents out-of-date register leading to people being disfranchised, of Lords, but the boundary review that sees the number of Lords, but the boundary review that sees the number of representatives of the people—us, the directly elected Members of this House. This House—this is the point made by the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty)—the Government seek to reduce the number of elected Members of this House. This House—this nation—should be appalled at that prospect; we should be demanding that it is addressed and reversed. How on earth can we, as a Chamber, agree to the idea of stuffing that place even fuller, while the Government reduce the number of representatives of the people—us, the directly elected Members of Parliament.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Pete Wishart: May I make a bit of progress, if that is all right? I have been very generous in giving way. I will try to give way later.

I want to speak about one of the other major features of the House of Lords: the deference—all the forelock-tugging to all these lords and ladies, and this idea of the high and mighty. We still have this political culture in the 21st century of showing deference to these people in ermine and of knowing your place and respecting your betters. Imagine designing a Chamber where that was still a feature of how we conducted our parliamentary debates.

I actually looked for the House of Lords TV channel the other day, and I came across the fantasy adventure “Game of Thrones” instead. I was listening to some of the language being used, and it struck me that the House of Lords is so like “Game of Thrones”, but without the dragons, beheadings and the proper bending of the knee—that is how ridiculous that institution down the road is.

One of the first things we have to do is get rid of all this 13th-century, medieval deference and create a modern, 21st-century establishment, to make sure that we get proper representation in the second Chamber.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that there are countries around the world that we can learn from? Countries such as Australia, ironically enough, have upper Chambers that are based on ours, but they have managed to leap ahead and to have elected Chambers. Actually, the Queensland Parliament has abolished its upper Chamber, which is now a tourist attraction. Does my hon. Friend agree that if we do not make progress, we will fall behind in the world in terms of the democratic process?

Pete Wishart: Absolutely. My hon. Friend makes a good point. I would love to see that place as a tourist attraction. We could stuff some of its Members so that we could see them. They are all dressed like a demented Santa Claus. It would be fantastic: maybe we could have a Christmas fantasy or something as a feature of a visitor attraction. That is where we are, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point.

What is the Government’s intention when it comes to the House of Lords? Well, there seems to be only one ambition, and that is to stuff it full with even more cronies and donors. We have seen the latest additions. I do not know whether this is the Government’s intention—perhaps the Minister could clarify—but I get the impression they are trying to secure a majority in the House of Lords, because they are unhappy with the defeats they have experienced at its hands in the past few months. I have not done my sums properly on that, but I suspect that it would still involve another 30 to 50 new Members, taking its membership up to 900. That would bring it very close to overtaking the People’s Congress of China. Is that what the Government really intend to do?

At the same time—this is the point made by the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty)—the Government seek to reduce the number of representatives of the people. They should be thoroughly embarrassed. As a short-term measure, we could create something called a “term peer”, which limit their term of office? As a short-term measure, we could invite such contributions from Members.
I know that lots of Conservative Members will not support our motion, but—I am taking this as a positive—I am beginning to sense a desire to address this, and we should work together as a House to do so. We first have to accept that there is something drastically wrong with the second Chamber—that it is not working and is starting to embarrass us. In the past, Conservative Members have always said that it is not an issue for them—"Why touch something that people are not concerned about?"—but I am beginning to sense a turnaround in that sentiment. A number of national newspapers have taken this up as a campaigning issue that they want to have addressed. As I have seen in my mailbox, more and more people are concerned about the quality of our democracy. If we allow a political circus like this to stand, we diminish our own role as the nation’s representatives. We are allowing it to continue as a feature of our democracy when we should be tackling it. I encourage hon. Members, even if they are not going to support us tonight, to look seriously at how we start to do so.

I was in the House when we previously looked at this—I am going back about 10 years now—and I voted for all the proposals that suggested replacing the Lords with a majority of elected Members. There was another failed attempt to address it at the time of the coalition Government. It is now incumbent on the Leader of the House—I am glad that he has joined us—to come forward with solid proposals on how we address this, because we have to do it: we cannot let it stand.

Today I, along with all my hon. Friends and the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray), who has left us, found out about our new constituencies. The Government intend to reduce the number of Scottish Members of Parliament from 59 to 53—six will be lost under their proposals to reduce the number of constituencies from 650 to 600. I had a little look to see how many Scottish Lords there are. I found 61 who have registered addresses in Scotland, and that is apart from the aristocrats and landed gentry who have lands and estates in my country. The number of Members of Parliament in Scotland has been cut from 72, when I was first elected, to 53, so we now have more Scottish peers than Scottish Members of Parliament.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that perhaps the starkest illustration of how bad things have become is that if the United Kingdom—or what was left of it at the time—tried to get back into the European Union at any point, it would be disqualified from membership because countries that were under Stalinist dictatorships 25 or 30 years ago are more democratic?

Pete Wishart: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Friend makes an important point that brings me on to my next subject—value for money.

We know how hard we work in this place. We have constituents whom we have to represent and make sure that their interests are brought to this House. The Lords have none of that. Some of them barely turn up. Some of them have barely been in for a debate or made any parliamentary contributions at all. Yet we are prepared to have this huge expense to sustain that place while the number of Members of Parliament who come down here and work hard for their constituents day in, day out is being cut.

I want to say a couple of other things about the reduction in the number of Members of Parliament. The Government are in the process of taking us out of the European Union, and when the 73 Members of the European Parliament, who have significant powers, are no longer there, we will be expected to take up that work. An increased workload will fall on a smaller number of Members of Parliament when we no longer have Members of the European Parliament working for us in Brussels and Strasbourg.

Although the Government intend to reduce the number of Members of Parliament, they have absolutely no plans whatsoever to reduce the numbers in Government. Instead of attempting in any way to reduce the size of Whitehall, they have made sure that there are more Departments, more special advisers and more civil servants. If there is to be any reduction in the number of Members of this place, surely there should be a reduction in the number of people who serve in this Government.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is making a very interesting point. Our workload will increase if and when Britain withdraws from Europe and we no longer have any Euro MPs, and the change in the boundaries will increase the workload further.
Pete Wishart: Absolutely, and we have an increasing population. I still do not know the Government’s case for the reduction in the number of MPs—well, I think I know why they decided to reduce the number of MPs. I think it was an attempt to stuff the Labour party, but the Labour party does not need any favours, help or assistance in that regard. It seems to be doing a pretty good job of that on its own.

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is being very unfair on that point. I think that the decision was made to reduce the number of MPs because in 2010, when the policy came forward, there was a great deal of public feeling that MPs had become too expensive. It was a response to the national mood at the time.

Pete Wishart: Of course there is a national mood in favour of such a cut. If we were to ask any member of the public whether they would like to see the size of Parliament and Government reduced—I am sure I will find this when I go back to my constituency at the weekend—they would say, “Yes, of course.” My point, and I believe that the hon. Gentleman might respect this, is that we seem to be reducing the number of elected Members but letting the other place grow exponentially. That is the key point. I am beginning to get the sense that the public are starting to look at what we have got down the corridor and deciding that we have to do this. Enough is enough.

Mr MacNeil: My hon. Friend has mentioned that there are 61 peers from Scotland but the number of MPs is going down. Is that not simply more grist to the mill and another reason why people will, this time, vote for independence in the second referendum that will come within two years of the triggering of article 50?

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) has been generous to a fault in giving way, and I think that that is appreciated by the House. May I very gently make the point that 11 Back-Bench Members wish to contribute, and the Chair will be looking to call the Front-Bench wind-ups at approximately 6.40 pm? There will have to be a very tight time limit on Back-Bench contributions, a fact of which I know the hon. Gentleman will wish to take account in the conclusion and conclusion of his eloquent contribution.

Pete Wishart: As you say, Mr Speaker, I was coming to my peroration. I have been as generous as possible when it comes to interventions.

Enough is enough. Surely, now is the time to address this matter. We have to look at what we are doing with the House of Lords. I am immensely proud of my party for failing to take places in the House of Lords, and I appeal to the Labour party to take no more places in the House of Lords. Several things have to happen almost immediately. There must be no more new Lords. We need a moratorium on appointments to the House of Lords. The Leader of the House must bring forward plans to reduce significantly the membership of the Lords, with a view to abolishing that place.

The House of Lords is a national embarrassment that should shame the country. It needs to be looked at and it needs to be reformed. Let us make this nation proud by creating a second Chamber that represents this country. Let us start to look at ways to address this. No more cronies in ermine; let us have a democratic Chamber.

5.9 pm

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Michael Ellis): It is a pleasure to open for Her Majesty’s Government in this debate, and a particular pleasure to debate with the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), if saying so is not too deferential for him.

I am grateful for the opportunity to debate this important subject. It is vital that our Parliament works effectively, and the House of Lords plays an important role in scrutinising and revising the legislation that governs us all. If I may say so, I think that the hon. Gentleman does a disservice to Members of the House of Lords who work very hard and are very valuable public servants. In many cases, they have been public servants for decades and devoted their lives to public service. In that House, there are leaders of industry and business who bring to it incredibly valuable expertise. There are Law Lords—formerly Lords of Appeal in Ordinary—as well as former Cabinet Ministers and Chiefs of the Defence Staff, so there is vast experience and expertise that is not available in this House or in many second Chambers in bicameral legislatures around the world. That House is replete with considerable expertise and experience.

Mr MacNeil: One of two things follow from what the Deputy Leader of the House has said. He is saying either that it is such a good arrangement down the corridor that we should abolish the Commons and repeat that arrangement in this place, or that other countries in the world should follow the same arrangement, in which case which ones would he advise to do so?

Michael Ellis: I think that the hon. Gentleman knows that this country has centuries of history, and we should recognise that our system has evolved over those centuries. That does not alter the fact that the House of Lords has vastly experienced people from all fields of life—doctors, lawyers and the like—but we recognise, as was clear from the Conservative party manifesto last year, that it cannot continue to grow indefinitely.

We must keep the question of the size of the House of Lords in perspective. Members of the Lords are not full-time or salaried. Many peers balance professional lives outside the House with work in it, so they do not attend all the time. It is a mischaracterisation to portray it as though 800 Members were permanently in the House. In fact, when one looks at the average daily attendance in the last session—I invite hon. Members to do so—we see that it is below 500. The figure is 497, which is well short of the number of Members of the House of Commons. To use a journalistic phrase, 800 is the figure for the available talent.

Mr Jackson: Did my hon. Friend notice an omission from the witty and erudite speech of the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart)? He had the brass neck to complain about over-representation, but Scottish National party Members, who receive the same salary as English MPs and have Members of the Scottish Parliament in near-coterminous constituencies to take the burden off them, vote against the boundary...
changes that will ameliorate the situation in which massive electorates in constituencies in England are represented by just one MP.

Michael Ellis: I had noticed that brass neck, and I congratulate my hon. Friend on making that point. At least 61 peers are registered as living in Scotland.

Mr Hanson: Will the Deputy Leader of the House answer one question? Does he support the principle of hereditary peers in the 21st century, or will he support the ten-minute rule Bill to abolish them that I introduced last year or Lord Grocott’s Bill to end them that is now in the other place? Will he confirm that he could now do so?

Michael Ellis: As I have said, as was set out in the Conservative party manifesto, the Government recognise the need to reduce the size of the House of Lords. However, comprehensive reform of the House of Lords is not considered a priority in the current Parliament, given the other pressing constitutional matters, not least, I should say, the further devolution of powers to Scotland and Wales. We consider there to be higher priorities.

The House of Lords has not stood still in the past few years. In the last Parliament, it took forward some important reforms, with Government support. Although there is more to do, that Chamber has constantly evolved. The House of Lords Reform Act 2014 allowed peers to retire formally and permanently for the first time. It also provided for the expulsion of peers for non-attendance. Previously, a peer had to apply for a leave of absence. The Act was promoted by Lord Steel.

Dr Eilidh Whiteford (Banff and Buchan) (SNP): I am grateful to the Minister for giving way because I have been trying to get in for some time. He tried to make a virtue of the fact that so many peers work part time. Does he not share my concern that that leaves things open to conflicts of interest in a way that even this place does not have? Does he share my concern that so many party donors are in the House of Lords?

Michael Ellis: I do not accept that characterisation at all. There is a proper process for appointments to the House of Lords by committee and a proper vetting process. The reality is that, as I have been saying, the House of Lords is a constantly evolving Chamber. The 2014 Act provided for the expulsion of peers—for example, for non-attendance—and for their retiring, a process that has seen some results. Further reforms introduced in 2015 empowered peers to expel Members for serious misconduct and suspend them beyond the end of a Parliament.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): I would like to go back to last year’s Conservative manifesto and the desire to reduce numbers. Did David Cameron not singlehandedly put more than 230 peers into the House of Lords? That is more than 25% of the House of Lords appointed by him alone.

Michael Ellis: Tony Blair created far more peers than David Cameron. Until such time as there can be comprehensive reform, we have a system in place that is still being operated.

Stephen Doughty rose—

Michael Ellis: I am being generous, but I will give way.

Stephen Doughty: I thank the Minister, who is indeed being generous. A moment ago he said that not all the 800 or so Lords turn up, but the fact is that they can, and often do on some of the most controversial legislation. People were flown in, for example, to vote on tax credits, and the bishops voted on equal marriage legislation, which many of us found pretty unacceptable given that the bishops are only from the Church of England. The fact is that they can turn up. They have a vote in our system on our laws. Surely that is the fundamental principle: they have more votes than we, the elected House, do.

Michael Ellis: We have a process whereby we accept that the size of the House of Lords needs to be looked at, but there are priorities, and that is not a priority in this Parliament. Attempts were made in the last Parliament. This Parliament has pressing business. Although the size of the House of Lords is recognised as large, reform needs to be dealt with in due course, and preferably by consensus.

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): Before my hon. Friend moves on, will he give way on that point?

Michael Ellis: I need to make some progress, if I may. Time is moving on, as Mr Speaker said.

The coalition Government also introduced some small-scale reform under the Lords Spiritual (Women) Act 2015—the hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) referred to bishops—which fast-tracks female bishops into the House of Lords by prioritising them in filling vacancies for the next 10 years. The reality is that there have been reforms. The first female bishop was introduced about a year ago in October 2015. I should point out that the House of Lords has cut its operating costs by 14% in real terms since 2010. Its membership has changed, too. More than 150 peers have left the Lords since 2010, with more than 50 retiring since that facility was introduced two years ago. Indeed, there are 400 fewer Members of the House of Lords now than in 1998. The House of Lords is not as large as it was but is substantially smaller than in 1998.

It is right that the House of Lords continues to look at how it can work more effectively. Where further possible steps can command consensus, Her Majesty’s Government would welcome working with peers to take reasonable measures forward in this Parliament. If that is possible in consensus with peers, we would welcome doing so.

At the same time, it is vital that we continue to reform parliamentary boundaries. The Conservative manifesto commitment was to “address the unfairness of the current Parliamentary boundaries, reduce the number of MPs to 600 to cut the cost of politics and make votes of more equal value.”

It is crucial that votes are of more equal value. Without the implementation of the boundary reforms, MPs will continue to represent constituencies that were drawn up on data that will be up to 20 years old at the 2020 general
election, disregarding significant changes in the population. The principle of equal-sized constituencies, endorsed by the Committee on Standards in Public Life, is one that I would have thought Members on both sides of the House accepted. It is crucial to have votes of equal value across the United Kingdom.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab/Co-op) rose—

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

Michael Ellis: I need to make some progress. There are a number of people who wish to speak and I have given way several times.

The reforms have already been delayed once by the Opposition parties and it is vital that they are not waylaid again by mixing them up with a discussion about reform of the House of Lords.

Mr MacNeil: The Minister says it is not a priority to deal with the House of Lords in this Parliament and that there are other issues. If he has other important issues—I can say this with authority, because my constituency is not affected—why is it so important to deal with the House of Commons? He wants a situation with fewer democratically elected parliamentarians, while he stuffs the other place. That does not ring true. We know full well that it is an attack on the Labour party, an attack on the other place. That does not ring true. We know full well that it is an attack on the Labour party, an attack on the other place. That does not ring true. We know full well that it is an attack on the Labour party, an attack on the other place. That does not ring true. We know full well that it is an attack on the Labour party, an attack on the other place. That does not ring true. We know full well that it is an attack on the Labour party, an attack on the other place. 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Michael Ellis: There is a public demand for value for money and to reduce the cost of politics. In all areas of public life, savings have been made so that we live within our means. It is right that this House should find savings, too. By reducing the number of MPs, we will save up to £66 million over the course of a Parliament.

Dr Daniel Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): The Minister is right to talk about the importance of democratic legitimacy. Does he accept that it is democratically illegitimate to have hereditary peers sitting and having any say in our democratic process? It gets in the way of the legitimacy of some of his other arguments when that very simple change could be put forward to help him carry through some of the arguments he is making about constituency equalisation.

Michael Ellis: As I have already said, the Government recognise the need to reduce the size of the House of Lords, but comprehensive reform is not considered a priority in this Parliament. I would have thought that the Scottish nationalists recognised the priority being given to other pressing constitutional matters, particularly the further devolution of powers to Scotland and Wales.

As I was saying, by reducing the number of MPs, we will save £66 million over the course of a Parliament. It is therefore right that we move forward with these proposals. The boundary proposals need not be tied with reforms of the House of Lords, not least as we do not believe that now is the right time to embark on comprehensive Lords reform. There are many different views on what form the House of Lords should take, and without any consensus there is no practical possibility, frankly, of taking such reform forward. There needs to be some practical realisation that, without consensus, it will not be possible.
no consensus. There are high priorities, including exiting the EU and further devolution for Scotland and Wales. Those are the priorities. That is why we do not support the motion, as I said. That, Mr Speaker, is the conclusion.

Mr Speaker: Before I call the next speaker, let me explain that the time limit on Back-Bench speeches will begin at six minutes. Dependent on progress, it may have to be reviewed.

5.27 pm

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck) (Lab): I am absolutely delighted to participate in today’s debate, particularly at a time when, owing to Conservative gerrymandering, the UK’s democratic structures look more fragile than ever. Under the previous Prime Minister, as numerous speakers have said, appointments to the unelected House of Lords were made at a faster rate than under any other Prime Minister since life peerages began. Incidentally, the outgoing Member for Witney will be replaced tomorrow—hopefully by the Labour candidate, Duncan Enright. Perhaps we have not seen the last of the former Prime Minister—perhaps we might see him in the House of Lords in future.

Astonishingly, between taking office in 2010 and leaving this year, the former Prime Minister added 261 peers at an estimated cost to the taxpayer of somewhere in the region of £34 million. Frighteningly, it is thought that up to 20% of all appointments to the House of Lords have been people who have given substantial donations to the Conservative party. Others appointed include the former Prime Minister’s cronies, his head of operations, the head of his No. 10 policy unit and the head of external relations.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the same could be said of the Labour party and the unions?

Ian Lavery: If the hon. Gentleman looked at the statistics on trade unionists, he would find that appointments by the former Prime Minister were completely different.

The bloated Lords now has over 800 Members and leaves the UK noticeably as the only bicameral country in the world where the second Chamber is larger than the first. Indeed, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), the only Chamber that is bigger is the national assembly of China. It is an absolute outrage. Let us be honest about it: we are a laughing stock in this regard. It is worth remembering, of course, that China’s population is 28 times the size of the United Kingdom’s.

Sir Desmond Swayne: I think that my hon. Friend the Deputy Leader of the House may have misremembered. It was not that there was no consensus; there was a Bill on which we all agreed, or which certainly had the support of the House, but it was the hon. Gentleman’s party that withdrew support for the programme motion. We could have had a reformed House of Lords, had it not been for the machinations of the Labour party.

Ian Lavery: I think there is more to the history of that than blaming the Labour party. I think it was the coalition Government that suffered a slight hiccup in their relationship at that point.

While what I have described was clearly bad enough, it came at the same time as the Government sought to reduce the number of elected Members of Parliament from 650 to 600. That was done under the guise of making politics cheaper, but it barely scraped the surface of the additional costs of the unelected Lords. Just where is the logic in reducing the size of the democratically elected Commons? If we want consensus, we can all agree to abolish the Boundary Commission review. We are being asked for consensus by the Minister, and that is fine, but if we want consensus in relation to certain issues, we should have consensus in relation to democracy. That is simple.

During the last Parliament, the attempt to rig democracy in favour of continuous Conservative control failed only because the Conservatives’ coalition partners, the threatened Liberal Democrats, rebelled—a point that I made to the right hon. Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne). They did not rebel over the much trumpeted 2010 anti-austerity policies. They were not terribly interested in opposing in-year spending cuts, increased tuition fees, or even the fundamentally illiberal “gagging Bill”. The truth is that the Liberal Democrats spat out the proverbial dummy because of the Government’s failure to back their poor compromise on reform of the Lords, which they themselves sought to stuff with their own peers. [HON. MEMBERS: “Where are they?”] Absolutely. I was waiting for an intervention then, but, looking around the Chamber, I see that there is no one from the Liberal Democrats here to intervene.

The coalition agreement on Lords appointments would have meant an additional 186 peers, costing an estimated £24 million. All of them would have been Liberal Democrats or Conservatives. Interestingly, the Dissolution honours list contained more Liberal Democrats than their current parliamentary cohort. I hear people say that that is not hard to achieve, but it is nevertheless an important point.

Although the Liberal Democrat rebellion scuppered the 2013 review, the legislation was never repealed, and the unfettered Conservative Government have returned to the task. Their proposals to redraw constituency boundaries are grossly unfair, unjust, undemocratic and wholly unacceptable. They are based on an out-of-date version of the electoral register with nearly 2 million voters missing, a disproportionately high number of whom are transient and poorer voters: students, and families forced to move as a result of changes in the benefit system. The changes fail to take any account of the myriad bits of additional work that the vote to leave the European Union and a return of powers would bring.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): The hon. Gentleman has suggested that the Boundary Commission, and therefore the commissioners, are guilty of a gerrymander. May I invite him to reflect on that? We have independent commissioners who are looking at our parliamentary boundaries. To impugn their honour, their integrity and their independence belies the hon. Gentleman.

Ian Lavery: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that, but I did not in any way suggest that the commissioners were gerrymandering. My view is that the Conservative party—this Government—are attempting to gerrymander the boundary changes. They are the ones who want the reduction from 650 to 600. I do not believe that there is
any other party in the House of Commons that wants that. That is my point, and I wonder how reducing the number of MPs from 29 to 25 in my native north-east or from 59 to 53 in the west midlands fits in with the Tory devolution agenda. I am unsure, but perhaps the Minister will answer that at some stage.

Michael Ellis: Does the hon. Gentleman have an objection to equal-sized constituencies, because that is what we are seeking to achieve with these boundary reforms: equal-sized constituencies across the country, which we do not have now?

Ian Lavery: I have absolutely no objection to equal-sized constituencies, but I do have an objection to gerrymandering and changing the boundaries to ensure there is a distinct advantage to one party rather than another. But perhaps the Minister will respond to the point about devolution.

The Conservatives have once again done what the Conservatives do best: look after themselves and their party despite the real needs of this country. While on the Opposition Benches there is broad agreement about equalising the size of the constituencies, we cannot support this Tory attempt at what we would class as establishing perpetual rule. Let me make it absolutely clear: the Labour party will emphatically oppose the proposals of the Boundary Commission.

On the question of the second Chamber, it is my party that has always sought to reform the Lords. We passionately believe in the role of the second Chamber in our great democracy: we believe that no Government of any colour should be able to implement legislation without the proper scrutiny that a bicameral legislature provides. But while this is true, I must add that my party firmly believes that the House of Lords should be a democratic Chamber, not one appointed to the patronage of the Prime Minister. We will not support any curtailment of the powers of Cross-Bench Lords and other measures designed to weaken the ability of the House of Lords to properly scrutinise, and where needed oppose, Government policy.

Under this Government, the use of secondary legislation has soared and is now being used for controversial and far-reaching policy changes such as tax credit cuts that traditionally have been introduced through primary legislation. Last year we were left with the sickening sight of Lord Lloyd Webber being flown back to the UK to try to defeat attempts to stop the Tory Government punishing hard-working British families through the Tory tax credit cut. I think it is appropriate at this point to put on record our sincere thanks for the great efforts of the Strathclyde report, which was a rapid response by the Government to these actions and designed to render the second Chamber toothless against such authoritarian measures.

In the wake of the Brexit vote, the House of Lords must be allowed to get on with its vital role of scrutinising legislation. The process is likely to throw up an enormous number of statutory instruments, and without the Lords they would probably go through on the nod.

Labour has long called for reform. In the reduction of the Lords and in government, we have sought to find consensus. It is important to remember that it was a Labour Government who cleared out most of the hereditary peers, but we fully acknowledge that fundamental reform is essential.

Given the vote to leave the EU, the Government’s boundary review and the political estrangement felt by many voters, this is a timely debate. We live in a changed society in a modern age, where leaps in technology have resulted in an increase in people across the UK becoming more interested in political issues, but participatory democracy feels alien to many and, with a few noticeable exceptions, wanes every year. Many people feel that politics is unable to change their lives, their area or their country for the better. As parliamentarians and politicians, we face a huge challenge of how we widen democracy in this country and give people the power to make things better.

Some people may wonder why the SNP has chosen once again to focus on constitutional issues rather than its day job of governing Scotland, but I will leave that to its Members. It is very interesting that the party should take such an interest in matters relating to the House of Lords. In Scotland’s devolved Parliament, no such second Chamber exists. The forensic scrutiny of the Lords in the UK is said to be provided by the Scottish Parliament’s Committee structure, but sadly the political balance of those Committees allows the Scottish Government to proceed very much as they wish.

That said, I am happy to inform the House that the Labour party will vote in favour of the SNP motion, but this should be only the beginning. The Government have many questions to answer on the issue of democracy; perhaps the Minister will address them at some stage. Will the Government agree to abandon the proposal for boundary changes until a review of the bicameral system in its entirety has been conducted?

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman talked about fairness, but why does he think it fair that his constituency, which has an electorate of 62,000, should remain as it is, while my constituency has an electorate of 80,000?

Ian Lavery: I have already said I believe in equalisation, but not in the reduction in the number of parliamentary seats from 650 to 600. I firmly believe we should be looking at the equalisation of constituencies, but that is not the issue here: the issue is the unfairness of reducing the number of MPs while at the same time stuffing the other place ram-jam packed with people who are unelected and unaccountable. That is totally and utterly unjustified.

It is inevitable that during this Parliament the Lords will be required once again to properly scrutinise, and if necessary overturn, the actions of a Government increasingly dominated by right-wing populism, although in this we must be careful about the recommendations of the Strathclyde report, which was a rapid response by the Government to these actions and designed to render the second Chamber toothless against such authoritarian measures.

Will the Minister give a guarantee that those Tory MPs who may lose their seats under the proposed boundary changes will not be stuffed into the House of Commons?
Lords as a solution to the problems that the Conservatives themselves face as a result of those changes? When will a plan be put in place to deal with the unwieldy, unelected and unaccountable second Chamber, and to replace it with something more befitting the 21st century? How will we bring democracy back to the communities that feel abandoned by politics?

We have an opportunity to rebuild democracy in this country, making politics relevant to people’s lives, and to rebuild trust. We need to put giving people a real say in their communities and workplaces at the heart of our work as public servants. Labour sees transferring power from Westminster, Whitehall and, indeed, the boardroom to our communities as imperative to the future of our democracy. We want real devolution of power, not the phoney Tory con of regional mayors, designed simply to pass on the blame for swingeing cuts. Democracy cannot be revived in every nation and region of our country, and in every community, town and city. It must be transparent, it must be fair and it must be accountable. It must be a major improvement on the current Tory plans. We need progress, and we need it very quickly. We need an agreed workable timeframe.

Democracy cannot be seen to be ignored; it needs to be embraced. I am pleased to say that the official Opposition will support the motion.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I remind Members that we have a six-minute limit on speeches to start with.

5.45 pm

Michael Gove (Surrey Heath) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in this debate after three outstanding Front-Bench speeches from three individuals—the hon. Members for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) and for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) and my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton North (Michael Ellis)—who had distinguished careers outside this place before they came here.

Many of us, I suspect, will be familiar with the political gambit that is the dead cat. Popularised by my friend and colleague Sir Lynton Crosby, the idea is that when one is in a position of deep political embarrassment one throws the equivalent of a dead cat on to the table. The purpose of so doing is to divert attention from what was just being discussed because, whatever the controversy that has been raging beforehand, people suddenly say, “Oh my God, there’s a dead cat on the table.” The conversation having changed as a result, embarrassment—such as my own at my execrable Australian accent just then—is avoided.

In this debate, the House of Lords, perhaps appropriately for an ermine-clad Chamber, is the dead cat. The SNP has chosen a discussion of the future of the House of Lords for this Opposition day debate because of a wish to divert attention from a number of other issues. The question I have to ask SNP Members is this: when they think about the issues that their voters bring to them in their surgeries or by email or correspondence, what are they? Overwhelmingly, they will be education, health, law and order and the economy. Why is the SNP not talking about those issues today? I will tell the House—

Richard Arkless (Dumfries and Galloway) (SNP): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Michael Gove: No.

We are not hearing about the NHS because there is an NHS crisis in Scotland. The SNP lost a vote in the Scottish Parliament not long ago as a result of its mismanagement of the NHS in Scotland. Recently, efforts to ensure adequate recruitment of general practitioners in Scotland failed. Why are we not hearing about education from the SNP? Just a minute. We are not hearing about education from the SNP because recently, and humiliatingly—

Richard Arkless: On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I do hope it is a point of order, Mr Arkless.

Richard Arkless: I am curious about the right hon. Gentleman’s assertions, Mr Deputy Speaker. The wording of the motion on the Order Paper is clear and I ask you kindly to bring him into line to discuss it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I will make a better suggestion. I will decide who is in order and when. I would not waste any more time on interventions, however, as we are struggling for time and I want to ensure that everyone gets equal time.

Michael Gove: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker.

We are not hearing about education because the Scottish National party has had to execute a humiliating U-turn and its Education Minister, Mr Swinney, has had to adopt our policies on education by giving funding to schools—

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order.

Michael Gove: While at the same time adopting our approach to examinations.

Mr Deputy Speaker: Order. We allow a little bit of movement, but the right hon. Gentleman is concentrating purely on education when we are discussing the size of the House of Lords, and even I struggle to see the connection. I would have expected a connection by now, and as there is not one coming I am sure, Mr Gove, that you will want to get back to the subject of the size of the House of Lords and what we are debating.

Michael Gove: Indeed. One of the challenges, as has been pointed out by those on both Front Benches, is that when SNP Members put forward proposals for the House of Lords, they offer no alternative method of
scrutiny. They simply propose unicameralism. Not only that, but they do not observe the basic pragmatic principle of the British constitution that we should preserve what works. Like the monarchy, the House of Lords is an institution that works, despite the fact that it might not succumb to every rational imprint. I speak as a Minister who has been held accountable and who has been cross-questioned—[Interruption.] An ex-Minister, I should say. I have been cross-questioned by Select Committees in the House of Lords with a greater degree of pertinacity and effectiveness than I have found in any other cross-examination I have ever faced.

The logic behind the SNP's position is that if it objects to any constitutional model that does not fit its own preconceptions, it should object to the monarchy. The real thrust behind the SNP's position is that it opposes the institutions that bind the United Kingdom together and are a focus for loyalty in this country, such as the monarchy, because of its single-minded pursuit of separation and independence come what may. If SNP Members really object to unelected figures meeting in a fashion that results in democratically elected Members of Parliament finding the will of the people frustrated, why are they the SNP? They object to unelected, unaccountable and out-of-touch figures wielding power, why do they not object to the existence of the European Council in its current form? Again, the answer is that they are only interested in separation.

One final point. We scarcely heard anything from the SNP on the vital importance of ensuring that all parliamentary constituencies should be of equal size. Having parliamentary constituencies of equal size was a demand of the Chartists in 1838, yet we still do not have them. I may be a young man in a hurry, and I may be an impetuous radical determined to bring about change at a pace faster than many would account, but surely, after nearly 200 years, the Chartists' demands should at last be honoured. All votes should be equal, all constituencies should be equal and democracy should be honoured.

5.52 pm

Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): It is a pleasure, as always, to follow the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove). It is just a shame that he has done a disservice to the House and to himself by refusing to discuss any part of the motion on the Order Paper. Let us consider the predicament into which the political class in this country has now gotten itself. Since the introduction of adult universal suffrage, there has been concern and sometimes embarrassment about the anachronistic nature of our bicameral legislature, in which one completely unelected House has the powers that it has. Over the decades, there have been attempts—many of them successful—to limit those powers and to assert the primacy of this House.

Now, however, we are embarking on a journey on which two things will happen simultaneously. The number of Members in the unelected House will increase to unprecedented levels and without any limit. At the same time, the number of people elected to make laws in this country will be reduced. In my view, that is a serial affront to the democratic values on which this country is based. That could be viewed as simply a matter of constitutional theory, but it is much more important than that. It speaks to the character of our democracy and our country. It lowers the esteem in which we are held abroad and, most importantly, it lowers the esteem in which this legislature is held by its own citizens. I believe that this is one of the contributory factors to the anti-politics, the disillusion and the alienation that have emerged in this country, and unless we do something to counteract this, we are all going to be in a lot of trouble.

As it happens, we do believe in an elected second Chamber, but the case for a bicameral Parliament has to be argued; it cannot just be assumed to be the default position. In fact, 16 of the 28 member states of the European Union have a unicameral Parliament. That is the norm throughout Europe, so we cannot assume that bicameralism is automatically the default.

Simon Hoare: The hon. Gentleman makes a strong and telling point about the size of the upper House when compared with the number of elected Members. However, when the official Opposition in this place are in disarray and clearly not up to the job of official scrutiny, the bicameral system means that efficient scrutiny can be done in another place. Does he agree that we should cherish that safeguard?

Tommy Sheppard: I want to come on to that. A frequent argument for a revising or upper Chamber is the inadequacy of the first Chamber, and I want to look at some of the imperfections of this House. To start with, we may be elected and accountable, but we can in no way be described as democratically representative of the population who elected us. A system that results in a majority Government with 37% of the vote can never be described as such. Our system is also much more centralised than that of any comparable country. We in Scotland have been on a home rule journey, which we are anxious to speed up, but I actually feel for colleagues in England, who represent the bulk of the United Kingdom, about the absence of any meaningful regional or democratic local government beneath this level. If we actually looked at the matrix of governance underneath this place, we could relieve many of the pressures on this House.

Our procedures for policy review and scrutiny are not fit for purpose. This adversarial system—two sword lengths apart—often militates against a consensual or at least a majoritarian approach to developing public policy, which is why mistakes in this place often have to be rectified somewhere else. However, that is not an argument for the House of Lords; it is an argument for improving the procedures of the House of Commons. The truth is that we need to consider our legislature as a whole and bring in major reforms to both Houses of Parliament. If we do not do that, our system of governance will fall further into disrepute.

Mr MacNeil rose.

Tommy Sheppard: I cannot give way because of the time. To say that the House of Lords is justified because it compensates for the inadequacy of the House of Commons is completely wrong. In fact, it exacerbates many of those inadequacies.

Turning to the imperfections of the House of Lords, that it is unelected is taken as given, but it is also profoundly unrepresentative for an appointed chamber. It is old, male and almost half of its Members are
domiciled in the south-east of England. In no way does that even attempt to recognise our country. It is also very big—I own it. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) noted that it is second only to the legislature of the People’s Republic of China—and very costly, with each peer costing an average of £120,000 a year and its operation costing almost £100 million. If the Government are serious about reducing the cost of government, I suggest that they look first at what is happening along the corridor.

It is time to begin the process of change. We should be looking at having an elected second Chamber. Indeed, that pledge was in the Conservative manifesto, so it has ceased to be an argument of principle; it is one of priorities and the timing being right. The time is absolutely right to begin the process of considering change and I recommend that this House do so.

Tommy Sheppard: I think I will get into trouble if I give way.

I want to consider the boundary changes, because the two things must be looked at together—they are two sides of the same coin. No case can be made for reducing the number of elected Members of Parliament at a time when this Parliament’s responsibility will increase as a result of leaving the European Union and the repatriation, in whatever form, of a vast amount of powers. At the very least, the pause button should be pressed until the Brexit plan is established and we see how this country manages to survive outside the European Union.

I commend the motion to the House. I am actually pleased with some of the comments from the Government Benches about being prepared to consider it. I point out that the motion does not call for the abolition of the House of Lords or any of the structures of the House of Commons or for electoral reform. It is a motion that says, “When you’re in a hole, stop digging.” It is one of Commons or for electoral reform. It is a motion that says, “Stop giving way.” Let us look at the plans for the future. Let us pause the reduction in the number of seats in the Commons. Let us pause the escalation in the size of the House of Lords. Let us see whether we can come back with proposals for reform that will command support from across the House and endear us much more to the people who put us here.

5.59 pm

John Penrose (Weston-super-Mare) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), and I should probably start with a declaration of interest, as my wife is a recently appointed life baroness in the Lords. I should add, for the benefit of Members opposite, that I believe she is now reconciled to the fact that before she was appointed she had voted repeatedly to abolish people like her, so it would be rather self-serving if I changed my mind now, as I hope everyone would agree. I am happy to inform the House that we are still talking even so. Although I instinctively support Lords reform, I oppose this motion. Why? It is because it uses Lords reform not as a dead cat, but as an excuse to delay boundary reform, a much-needed and overdue improvement to the plumbing of our democracy.
will only make things worse. It will corrode trust in our democracy even further, so I urge, even at this late stage, the SNP to withdraw this motion as fast as possible.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Just before I bring others in, may I say that we are going to have to drop to a five-minute limit, and I want to try to get everybody in on the same level?

6.4 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): On 14 January, I rose to introduce an Adjournment debate on this very issue, and I could easily reiterate the points that I articulated to the House then. Well, for the avoidance of doubt, I will and I will take great pleasure in it. All that has changed since we last discussed reform of the unelected, unaccountable House of Lords is that there are more of them—more party donors, more party hacks, less openness, less transparency, and more ermine.

At the same time, the reviews of the boundary commissions—yes, there is more than one—have sought to reduce further the number of elected Members to this House of Commons. While this House is reduced in number and relevance, the House of Lords, at its present velocity of expansion, will soon exceed the National People’s Congress of China. It has already exceeded the size of the European Parliament, which is directly elected by more than 400 million European citizens. It seems that we are taking back control and handing it on a plate to the barons and baronesses of the unelected upper Chamber. At least on the SNP Benches, we have spoken and will continue to speak with one voice. In our manifesto at the general election, we placed our proposal before the entire community of Scotland. “Abolish it”, we said and we won.

If we as Members are to work effectively and with electoral legitimacy—

Michael Gove rose—

Martin Docherty-Hughes: Forget it. The right hon. Gentleman can sit right down.

If we are to work with electoral legitimacy, Britain’s upper Chamber should resemble less the National People’s Congress of China and more the revising and advisory chamber of the people’s Parliament of a 21st century liberal democracy.

Let us turn now to the hope of many Members of this House—a hope that is shared by my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), who should wear with pride his title of leading abolitionist—that any future reform of the upper Chamber should not only consider its size, but limit it and remove with haste its ability as an unelected and unaccountable Chamber to generate legislation [Interruption.] Members should listen; they might learn something. Once again, let me state that this is an affront to my constituents and an aberration at the heart of the British state.

I have previously likened the antics of the previous Government to a “Carry On” movie. Their antics had the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne) cast as the arch-villain, Citizen Camembert, and the former Prime Minister as the good cop and leading man, the Black Fingernail. I do hope that the new cast of actors are less like the Duke de Pommefrîtes. That said, however, we may end up with Citizen Bidet, and we all know where that ends—down the cludgie.

I continue to believe, in this parliamentary term at least, that this aspiration will probably be a lost cause given that the hierarchy of the Conservative party—and even those punted to the Back Benches—has a long-term love affair with the upper Chamber. Over the previous Parliament, 200 unelected and unaccountable peers were added to the Lords. Even the new First Lord of the Treasury has appointed 16 new Members, 15 of whom are Tories.

Of the peerage, let me turn again, as I did on 14 January, to a certain cadre. I will be louder this time, because they did not seem to hear me the first time. I am talking about the archbishops and bishops of the established Church of England. Many have likened their position to that of the theocrats of the Islamic Republic of Iran. My direct challenge is this—

Michael Gove rose—

Martin Docherty-Hughes: No, sit down, son. I have told you once and I will not tell you again.

Those bishops and archbishops have no place in the governance of the nation of Scotland. They have no right to vote, if such a thing should occur, on the civic or legislative life of our nation. Let me make myself clear. It would be easy for me to vent frustration, but I shall make one call tonight, which is to abolish it. Listen to what the nation of Scotland said at the last general election: get rid of them.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I think we will go from one extreme to the other. I call Jacob Rees-Mogg.

6.9 pm

Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg (North East Somerset) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is an enormous pleasure to follow the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes), who expressed himself with such vim and vigour.

The motion tabled by the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) is an important motion and a proper subject for us to debate. It is something that we have been debating for hundreds of years. The earliest debate I can find for deciding to limit the House of Lords is in 1719, and we will all remember that the Parliament Act 1911 states that it is a temporary measure until a more democratic means of choosing an upper House can be found.

These problems are not new, and there are serious problems with the House of Lords. I do not think anyone would try to pretend otherwise. It is not by any means perfect and its imperfection is partly in its size, partly in its unaccountability and partly, as the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire so rightly said, in its Liberal Democrats. I do not say that as a cheap shot against the Liberal Democrats, though those are perfectly fun. I say it because the very large number of Lib Dems who are there, who are abusing their position in the Lords to thwart the will of the elected Government,
have made a real problem for the Government and for the democratic legitimacy of the House of Lords. There are unquestionably problems, but what is the solution?

What we have considered in previous Parliaments is a democratically elected upper House. That sounds very sensible in theory, but there is a fundamental problem for us in this House that if we have a democratically elected House of Lords, its powers will be equal to ours. Even if the letter of the law allows us to overrule the Lords, that will soon cease to be a political reality. A democratically elected House of Lords challenges the Commons, and if a democratically elected House of Lords is on a different electoral system, it might even claim a higher validity than we have and therefore the right to overrule us. Then we would probably have a gridlocked system like that in the United States, with the two Houses being unable to co-operate and an inability to govern and to get legislation through.

Mr Jackson: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Liberal Democrats were complicit in the failure of their once-in-a-generation opportunity for House of Lords reform by bringing forward a ludicrous proposal for a 15-year non-renewable mandate, which would have challenged the authority and mandate of this House?

Mr Rees-Mogg: That was part of the problem. The other problem was that they were quite unwilling to set out what they would do between the conventions that both Houses have. If those conventions are legislated for, who is to determine whether the conventions are followed? Would that be the courts, and then would the courts interfere in Parliament? Or would the conventions be decided by consensus between the two Houses? In that case we would be back to the gridlock that I was warning about.

That is why the problem has not been solved. There is not a good democratic solution unless we are willing to downgrade the House of Commons, which I personally would be very much against doing. With our constituency-based relationship we have a wonderful system of democracy through this House. The hon. Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery) made a very powerful speech, but I disagree with him in thinking that the reform to constituencies is gerrymandering. It really is not. It is getting the numbers to be equal, which is a proper thing to do.

It would be wrong to fight the next general election on the electoral roll from 2000. That needs to be updated, and although the later the date the better—so I am not unsympathetic to the call to move it on two years later—that is not practical. It cannot be done on the absolutely last electoral roll, but by doing it every five years, we ensure that there is continuity in updating and a regular fairness in the size of the constituencies. I disagree with the hon. Gentleman on that point and think it is important, through that constituency link, to defend the primacy of this House, which is the democratic House.

That is why I am less worried than the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire about the failures of the House of Lords. Ultimately we are in charge. We can use the 1911 Parliament Act. We may decide to use that to do something on statutory instruments if the House of Lords challenges the Government on their democratically mandated implementation of policy. The democratic right overrides the undemocratic element. That gives me certainty and security that the nation is not becoming the People’s Republic of China, Lesotho or whatever other random examples have been brought up, because they do not have that democratic underpinning. Therefore, the size of the House of Lords is just a problem that we will have to live with.

In 1719, the main reason for opposing a limit on the numbers in the House of Lords was that a limit would make the Members who were already there more powerful because their power could not be diluted by adding more peers. That remains true today, because the one great authority this Chamber still retains over the House of Lords, via the Prime Minister, is not so much the 1911 Act, but the threat of creating many more peers, which was, of course, threatened in 1832 and in 1911—on both occasions to ensure the democratic will could prevail. We must maintain the ability to do that, even while recognising that the House of Lords is too big and has problems. However, this needs to be an evolutionary reform, which I would happily go into, Mr Deputy Speaker, but on another occasion.

6.15 pm

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for North East Somerset (Mr. Rees-Mogg), who always makes very substantial contributions when he speaks in the House during our deliberations. I rise in support of the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), who gave us his usual majestic performance while opening the debate.

Since being elected, I have been immensely impressed with the robotic discipline of some Government Back Benchers when it comes to political messaging. The most infamous catchphrase during my first term here was “the long-term economic plan”. We have not heard much about that since the EU referendum, for obvious reasons. Another famous battle cry in my time here has been “cutting the cost of politics”. Today’s welcome debate on House of Lords reform gives us the opportunity to deconstruct that myth once and for all, because it is impossible to divorce culling the number of MPs from the deliberate bloating of the upper House by this Government.

Over a quarter of Welsh MPs are set to be removed under the boundary review—proportionally more than in any other constituent nation of the UK or region of England. Wales faces a double whammy: a poorer constitutional settlement in terms of powers, when compared with our friends in Scotland and Northern Ireland, yet the largest cut in representation in this place. I have no problem with equalising the size of constituencies for this House, but for that to happen and to have my support, Wales must have the same constitutional settlement as the other devolved Administrations. However, the Wales Bill, which has just made its way from this place to the other House, is a terrible Bill if we look at the powers offered to other parts of the UK.

At almost 800 Members, the House of Lords is now the second-largest Chamber on earth—beaten to the top spot only by China’s National People’s Congress, which I am led to believe has nearly 3,000 members. China,
of course, has a population 28 times the size of the United Kingdom’s. Between this House and the other place, Westminster has over 1,400 politicians, and there is nothing stopping that number climbing even higher; there is no limit on the number of peers the two big parties can send to the other place, whether that involves failed career politicians or just favours to old friends. The cost of running the Lords, as we have heard, is around £100 million per annum, according to the Electoral Reform Society. Each peer costs taxpayers in our respective nations £120,000. Culling the upper House therefore seems the most obvious way of cutting the cost of politics.

It is also important to remember that Members of the upper Chamber can become Ministers: they can not only amend our laws, but make them, and that point has been missing so far from the debate.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there are many defects in our constitution at the moment? One of the principal ones is the small number of Members of the Welsh Assembly. Their work has trebled, and they are under great strain—some of them are on three or four Committees. If we are to have the reforms that we need, it would be far better not to do things piecemeal and not to reduce the number of MPs only, but to have a convention, so that we can get a balance and reduce membership in other places, and that can be done only by an overall, comprehensive reform of the constitution.

Jonathan Edwards: I am very grateful for that intervention. I have often suspected that the hon. Gentleman—my honourable comrade—has mind-reading abilities, because that was exactly my next point.

The National Assembly for Wales, which is responsible for major public services in Wales—the health service, education, economic development and many other issues—has just 60 elected representatives. Discounting Welsh Ministers, that leaves only 42 Back Benchers to scrutinise a Government making vital decisions in my country. If the Wales Bill makes its way through the House of Lords and gets a legislative consent motion in the Assembly, although that might be in question, it would also have, for the first time, responsibility for fiscal powers in Wales. That is a clear case for increasing the numbers in the National Assembly.

Before the latest culling of the Lords when the former Prime Minister handed out peerages to his friends, 27% of peers listed representative politics as their main profession prior to entering the Lords. Most of them had been MPs; it must be the only legislature in the world where losing elections helps people gain seats. Many colleagues have mentioned the Liberal Democrats. I am not going to attack the Lib Dems, but I remember that the Lib Dems filled two of the bottom Government Benches during the last Parliament, and when I recently went to see a debate in the House of Lords, they were all sitting there in the right-hand corner, much to my surprise. A further 7% of peers had been political staff, and twice as many had worked as staff in the royal household than as manual or skilled labour. It is hardly a Chamber that is representative of our various communities across the United Kingdom.

For as long as decisions affecting Wales are to be made in the other place, Plaid Cymru will continue to press for equal representation for us. However, we believe that there is no role for patronage and an appointment system in a modern democracy. Following the Brexit vote, the UK faces a stark choice between two futures: do we return to a very centralised system based here in Westminster or move towards a more voluntary Union, as advocated by more sensible voices such as Lord Sainsbury in the other place? In my view, this place should turn into a Parliament for England, and the House of Lords should be reformed to become a confederal Parliament.

6.22 pm  
David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): I am going to do something very brave and propose a solution to the problem down the corridor. I do not want to get rid of any of the lords, so I will not vote for this motion. Without wanting to be controversial, I have a bloodless solution. If we retired lords at 75 years of age, we would remove approximately 250 of them straight away. Let us not forget that the lords are there not to represent but to scrutinise. We do not want to get rid of every one of them, because there is expertise down there that can outweigh expertise in this Chamber—especially on the SNP Benches.

The average age in the Lords is 70, believe it or not, while the average age of those who actually contribute in the other place is 65. After that age, attendance drops off dramatically. We have to look at this in the round. If we reduced the Lords by 250 Members—those aged over 75—we would bring it down to approximately the size of the Commons. Those lords would then stay on to advise. They would not get paid or claim expenses, but go on to a higher Chamber called the Lords council, and advise their own Committees. They could then feed into the legislative process without any cost to the taxpayer.

Outside this Chamber, nobody is talking about the Lords—it is only us in here. We should not throw the baby out with the bathwater; we should look at a grown-up way of getting the numbers down. Once we have done that, over a period of 15 years, natural attrition will take its toll. The 250 who have been put into the higher status could still call themselves lords, still have the gravitas and the gratification they want, and still contribute. They will go, and we can have an apportioned system, with so many Conservatives, so many from Labour and—dare I say it?—so many from the SNP. We can break it into segments. They will be able to scrutinise sensibly in a cross-party manner. I hope to have brought some kind of sense to this subject.

6.25 pm  
Mr David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): I want to lay my cards on the table straight away and say that I support the motion and I support the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck (Ian Lavery). I have been here for nearly 25 years, and in that time I have voted on every available occasion to abolish the House of Lords. If I have not been able to abolish the House of Lords—self-evidently, I have not—I have voted for change in the House of Lords.

I will propose some changes that the Government could deliver, should they so wish, to improve democracy without achieving my ultimate objective of massive reorganisation of the formulation of the House of Lords. It is not tenable in the 21st century to have an
unelected House deciding on policy. It is not tenable to have hereditary peers deciding on policy. It is not tenable to have hereditary peers who are elected by other hereditary peers, with very small mandates—sometimes as few as three votes—deciding policies that affect the lives of my constituents. At a time when the Government are seeking to reduce the membership of this House from 650 to 600 and to remove completely Euro Members of Parliament, whose powers and responsibilities will be transferred back to this House, it is not tenable for us to allow the House of Lords to continue unchanged.

The recently appointed Lord Speaker, Lord Fowler, is a former Conservative MP whom I remember being a member of the Cabinets of Mrs Thatcher and John Major when I first came here. He has said that there is no way the Lords can defend its current size of 820 peers and that “we’ve been faffing around on this for some time now. And my fear would be that unless we take the initiative here someone else will”.

Let me suggest some simple initiatives. I will set the bar very low, because the Government’s position appears to be that they cannot make massive change, so they will make no change. A proposal to bring some things back into kilter is something that we in this House should support, and I suggest these three simple changes.

First, let us remove from the House of Lords the 92 hereditary peers, 91 of whom, as I said in an intervention on the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), happen to be men and only one of whom is a woman. Those 92 hereditary peers are elected by as few as three votes.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): As the right hon. Gentleman has just said, those hereditary peers are elected. The motion states that the Government should “put in place plans to significantly reduce the number of unelected Lords”.

Is he proposing that the number of hereditary peers should stay the same, if he supports the motion?

Mr Hanson: If the hon. Gentleman listens to what I am saying, he will hear that I have three small points to make—three very low bars. The first low bar is the removal of the hereditary peers. The second low bar is not to fill any more vacancies with unelected peers until the House of Lords gets down to a reasonable size, below that of the House of Commons.

On hereditary peers, let me just say that one of those recently elected is the Lord Fairfax of Cameron, whose great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather got his peerage because he was the first Englishman to travel to Scotland to swear allegiance to the new King James I. I happen to think that in the 21st century, we should pick our legislators on more than the fact that one of their ancestors knew how to get to Scotland quite quickly. That is no way to run a modern House of Lords.

Lord Thurso, the last Member to be elected as an hereditary peer, was an hereditary peer but he renounced his peerage, came to this place and sat on the Liberal Democrat Benches until he lost his seat, when he suddenly rediscovered his blue blood. That is no way to run a modern democracy. In April this year, I introduced a ten-minute rule Bill to abolish hereditary peers. A Bill in another place in the name of my noble Friend Lord Grocott is designed to do something very similar to what the hon. Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) has suggested: not to fill the position of hereditary peers who retire or die. Those are both simple steps that could be taken now to remove the hereditary peers. Those things would be part of a wider package in due course, but the Government could certainly do them now. I am sure that no right hon. or hon. Member of this House would object to a small Bill to meet those objectives.

My second suggestion is not to fill vacancies until the size of the House of Lords gets down to that of the House of Commons. What is wrong with that? I want massive change—I have voted to abolish the Lords—but in the absence of consensus, let us look at how we can reduce the number of Members over time. That is perfectly reasonable.

The third suggestion may be revolutionary, but it is an attempt to find a compromise. I agree with the Government that Members of Parliament should represent equal numbers of constituents. Let us do that, but let us keep 650 MPs and have a boundary review on that basis, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wansbeck said. In my part of the world, Wales, we would lose seats under such a review—we have 55,000 to 60,000 electors in each constituency—but we would have the same number of constituents and reasonable representation. But, no, this Government are seeking to reduce the representation from 650 to 600 Members, while in previous 18 months the former Prime Minister appointed 132 peers to the House of Lords.

I am sorry, but I happen to think we need radical surgery and radical change. I have three simple suggestions to get the ball rolling: remove the hereditaries, freeze appointments and consider keeping 650 Members of Parliament with equal numbers of voters, including—dare I say it?—in the Western Isles and the Isle of Wight, which are slightly different. Let us look at those things and make sure we make some radical changes on the road to democratising this Parliament and giving a lead to the rest of the world.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. There are four Members left to speak. With about 10 minutes available for Back Benchers, may I suggest they have about three minutes each?

6.31 pm

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): It is a pleasure to contribute to this very interesting debate. It is disappointing that SNP Members set their face against what could have been quite a consensual motion. I cannot support it because it conflates boundary changes with House of Lords reform, but we could have developed a consensus in the debate.

The House of Lords is of course an anachronism in a modern liberal democracy. We would not chose to invent it from scratch, were we able to do so, but we must nevertheless concede that its Members have the skills, knowledge and experience that we need. Because they have more time—they do not have the guillotine—and are not whipped so hard as we are, they can in some ways do the work of scrutiny, overview and improvement better than we can in this House.
We must also concede that the royal prerogative of absolute medieval monarchy has been transferred over the centuries from the king or queen through the House of Lords to the Executive of the Prime Minister and the Cabinet, so there has been an accretion of powers. Under such an incremental approach, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), powers have been given away so that the upper House cannot vote against the Finance Bill —following the people’s Budget of 1909, and the Parliament Act 1911—and its powers have been otherwise circumscribed.

The flaw in that argument is that we had an opportunity for a once-in-a-generation change. As I mentioned earlier, because of the ludicrous proposals put forward by the Liberal Democrats—the 15-year, non-renewable terms would have meant that authority was contested between the mandates of the two Houses—that opportunity was wasted, as most Government Members would never have supported them. The issue about the authority of the two Houses is still a problem. I do not buy the argument that unicameral Parliaments are therefore better. The reason why so many EU countries have them is that so much legislation, policy making and governance is done by the European Union rather than in their own countries, but that will end very soon—because Brexit does mean Brexit.

I am an agnostic on the House of Lords—I have not made up my mind one way or the other—but my concern is that it is beginning to infringe some basic constitutional proprieties, such as the Salisbury convention. Its Members have taken it upon themselves to cut across the views of the elected Government as set out in their manifesto, which is absolutely wrong and unacceptable. Of course, we have moved on in other ways. We no longer recruit the Executive from the House of Lords but mainly from the House of Commons.

I put to the House this prospectus. It is not necessarily for the Government to bring forward legislation to reform the House of Lords. It is for the Lords themselves to do that—mention has been made of Lord Fowler’s views. I believe that the Lords are potentially in the last chance saloon, certainly with regard to their authority and the belief, faith and trust of the greater public in the system of which the Lords are a part. The challenge is for the Lords to reform themselves as they have done in the past. If they do not, I fear that another Government—although perhaps not one of my own political persuasion or political colour—will take drastic, draconian action.

That will be damaging to the constitutional firmament and settlement of this country, in which to a certain extent the Lords have played an important role over many hundreds of years.

6.35 pm

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): My disgust at the undemocratic, unaccountable, unelected House of Lords has been aired in this place on a number of occasions. Let us be clear that there is absolutely no case in any kind of modern democracy for the number of unelected peers to so greatly exceed the number of democratically elected Members in this place. It is quite simply astounding that plans to slash the number of democratically elected MPs are proceeding, further widening the gross disparity—

Michael Gove: Will the hon. Lady give way?
Meanwhile, the Government must discard their plans to reduce the number of democratically elected Members of Parliament.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I apologise to the two speakers who cannot get in, but I have to call the Front Benchers. I am sorry about that, but the interventions have killed us.

6.39 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): This has been a really interesting and wide-ranging debate. We have heard a number of people propose changes to the House of Lords and ways in which we can go forward. What we have not heard is anybody saying that they think the House of Lords is wonderful and that we should keep it as it is. I think there is a general feeling across the House and across the country that, in the absence of abolishing the House of Lords, we need to reform the House of Lords.

I particularly enjoyed the contributions of my hon. Friends the Members for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) and for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard). The hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose) was typically thoughtful in his contribution on this matter—I have previously enjoyed his contributions—and the speech from the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) was, erm, interesting.

Michael Gove: I am very grateful that a fellow Gordonian has given way. Can the hon. Lady clear up for me an area of doubt and uncertainty? The hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) said that the SNP spoke with one voice on the issue of House of Lords reform. He said that the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) was an abolitionist and that that was SNP policy. However, the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard) said he did not want to abolish the House of Lords, but merely wanted to reform it. What is SNP policy? If it is abolition, is the hon. Member for Edinburgh East out of line?

Kirsty Blackman: The manifesto we stood on said that the SNP would abolish the House of Lords and replace it with a fully elected second chamber. The motion we are putting forward today gives the Government a slightly more gentle way forward. It does not suggest full abolition at this stage. It suggests making positive changes.

I want to talk about a few things that were mentioned during the debate today.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): One of the rotten things about the House of Lords and the system of patronage is the fact that Ministers who are unaccountable to the electorate can be appointed by the Prime Minister. One recent example is Baroness Ros Altman, who campaigned on behalf of the WASPI women. She then became a pensions Minister and suddenly had selective amnesia. Is that not just typical of the system that exists?

Kirsty Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I will come on to the make-up and appointments system of the Lords.

My hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire pretty much had those of us on the SNP Benches weeping in hysteric at some of the things he pointed out. He was just highlighting the ridiculous nature of the House of Lords. It is absolutely ridiculous that in 2016 deference and fawning are required. We have people dressed in ermine robes and we are expected to genuflect to them. It is absolutely ridiculous that we live in a society where that is still okay.

The hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare said that everybody is equal in this country when we vote. Everybody is not equal in this place. Those people in the other Chamber are somehow above the rest of us and that is not right. They have not been democratically elected to those positions and they should not have preferential treatment as a result of the appointments system.

The appointments system is—well, it is frankly ridiculous. We have a Prime Minister who was not elected to be Prime Minister. She was elected to Parliament—absolutely—but she was not elected to be Prime Minister of this country. Now, because of the appointments system to the House of Lords, she has the power to choose the people who will legislate. She has the power to choose the people who will sit in that other Chamber and make laws for this country. It is ridiculous that somebody can have this power without being elected to that position.

As has been stated by a number of my colleagues and Members across the House, appointments to the House of Lords are not always made on the basis of the people who best know what they are talking about. One Member mentioned that people may be experts in their field when they are elected, but their expertise very quickly disappears. I suggest that somebody who was a teacher 20 years ago is no longer the best person to be an expert on the education system, unless they have been particularly good at keeping up with changes. We have a whole House full of former experts—of ex-experts—and it is very difficult for us because we cannot get rid of them.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making some excellent points. Does she agree that there are plenty of other ways in which these experts can give their opinion, without being appointed for life?

Kirsty Blackman: Absolutely. I have been a member of a Select Committee in this House, so I am well aware that we are able to bring people who are genuine and current experts before such Committees to give evidence. We also have a great system whereby people can submit evidence in respect of legislation.

Let me make a couple more points on the make-up of the House of Lords. As of last year, there were only two Members of the House of Lords who were under 40, which is totally unreflective of society. On the cost, the Minister mentioned that there is an average attendance of about 500 each day. At £300 a day, that is £150,000 a day just on the allowances. Let us be clear that those allowances are totally tax free. They are not salary, but tax-free allowances—and the Treasury does not even get a cut of that £150,000. Most of those Members should be paying at least 40% tax. When it comes to making changes to the cost of Government and Parliament, I suggest that that might be a good place to start.
I want to be clear about the link in the motion between reform of the House of Lords and the Boundary Commission review. If the Government are serious about reducing the cost of Parliament and about making the UK and the nations that make it up more democratic, their attempt to reduce the number of MPs—comprising the truly elected Chamber—is completely the wrong place to start. To begin with, we have the first-past-the-post system, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East mentioned, is not democratic. There are so many wasted votes. A number of them do not count because people are voting for someone who can never get elected in the seat. A system of proportional representation would be a much better way of extending democracy than trying to equalise the numbers in each constituency.

If the aim is to make the political system in this and other countries more democratic, it would be possible to make the Government a bit more transparent. The Cabinet Office is tasked with making government more transparent, but it has failed spectacularly—and I do not mean only this Government; I am not blaming this one alone, because previous Governments have spectacularly failed to give Governments like to be in power; they like to keep power for themselves, so they like to make sure that people are not very clear about what is going on.

There are a couple more things that could be done to reform the House of Lords. We could get rid of the hereditary peers and the bishops. We could also—I think this would be a great thing to do—stop the House of Lords being able to introduce primary legislation. Why is the so-called “revising Chamber” able to introduce primary legislation? That Chamber is appointed, not elected. Members of the House of Lords should not be lawmakers in the countries of the UK. They are supposed to be part of a revising Chamber, so they should spend their time revising, not bringing legislation forward.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak in the debate, and the wide-ranging contributions that we have heard from across the House. I am particularly grateful for the support we have received from some Conservative Members, which is unusual and welcome. I thank all Members who have contributed, and I hope the House will support the motion.

6.48 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): It has been an honour to listen to this well-attended and, at times, feisty and passionate debate. I must admit that I am somewhat surprised at the SNP’s obsession with this particular issue and that they would choose this subject for their Opposition day debate. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) noted, we could have discussed other issues. I lost count of the number of times that the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) talked about ermines.

Let us look at the public mood on this matter. A YouGov poll of June 2012 asked a simple question on the proposition:

“Reform of the House of Lords is vital: it should be a priority to change the system”.

Only 18% agreed, with 20% saying the House of Lords should be left alone. The overwhelming majority—52%—said that it was not and should not be a priority. The 2015 Conservative manifesto agreed with this principle by saying that it was “not a priority” in the next—meaning this—Parliament.

As the Deputy Leader of the House of Commons said at the beginning of the debate, the House of Lords has begun reform in the last few years. Important reforms have been introduced and they have been successful because they have been driven by the Lords themselves. Since the introduction of the House of Lords Reform Act 2014, for instance, peers have been able to retire simply by giving written notice to the Clerk of the Parliaments.

Jeremy Quin: The Minister has referred to reforms that have taken place over the past few years. Does he share my concern about the possibility that the motion, as drafted, could reduce the number of appointed peers to less than the number of hereditary peers?

Chris Skidmore: That is an interesting point, which I do not think has been made before in the debate. The motion could, in fact, suggest that the number of elected peers remain at 93, which would cause something of a constitutional abnormality.

Since the introduction of the House of Lords Reform Act 2014, peers have been able to retire. Such retirement is permanent, and cannot be rescinded. More than 50 peers have chosen to retire, including 16 so far in 2016. That important reform has had an impact not just on the numbers in the House of Lords, but on the way in which it operates. The Act also provided for peers to be expelled for non-attendance, and the House of Lords (Expulsion and Suspension) Act 2015 gave the Lords new powers to expel its members for serious misconduct. The cost of the Lords has also been reduced by 14% in real terms since 2010.

Let me now deal with some of the excellent speeches that have been made today. I welcome the return of the hon. Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose), my excellent predecessor, said that he was even willing to put his own marital relations at risk for the sake of his belief in reform of the House of Lords. He also said that boundary reform to bring about equally sized constituencies was an essential priority.
**Henry Smith** (Crawley) (Con): I am pleased that my hon. Friend is talking about equalising constituency sizes in the House of Commons, and also about the importance of a reduction in the number of Members of Parliament. Will he reflect on the fact that the United States House of Representatives has just 435 members, and the French National Assembly 577?

**Chris Skidmore**: That is a good point. I also recall that back in 2010, I think, the Liberal Democrat manifesto called for a reduction in the number of seats to 500. It is unfortunate that not a single Liberal Democrat is present today to discuss House of Lords reform.

The hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) made a lively and hyperbolic speech in which, perhaps somewhat disconcertingly, he demonstrated his expert knowledge of the “Carry On” movies. My hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg) dated Lords reform back to 1719, but as a Tudor historian I can tell him that the issue of membership of the House of Lords and the detested appearance of so-called new-made parvenus such as Thomas Cromwell, the Thomas Audleys and the William Cecils suggest that today’s debate fits very nicely into the finest traditions of history.

My hon. Friend the Member for Morecambe and Lunesdale (David Morris) spoke about the issue of retirement. I am pleased that that is already happening, as I mentioned earlier, but I think that if those in the other place have been watching the debate, they may be slightly concerned by his talk of attrition.

The right hon. Member for Delyn (Mr Hanson) mentioned recent comments by the Lord Speaker, Lord Fowler, about the size of the House of Lords and the fact that it needs to take the initiative on the issue. The Government agree that the House of Lords is too large, but believe that it must be for the Lords themselves to lead the process. My hon. Friend the Member for Peterborough (Mr Jackson) raised the same issue, and I entirely agree with him. He also spoke about his agnosticism on the subject, and highlighted the need to protect historic precedents such as the Salisbury convention. I agree with that as well.

Let us be clear about the motion that we are discussing. This is not just about reform of the House of Lords; this is an attack on a Government’s manifesto commitment that we are determined to introduce—equal-sized constituencies and a reduction in the cost of politics in this House. At a time when many areas of public service have made sensible reductions and savings, the public will not forgive us if we do not put our own house in order.

Let us be clear: this motion does not seek simply to delay the boundary changes and boundary reform. We have already had a delay thanks to a motion, put down and voted on by Labour and Liberal Democrat Opposition Members. If we went into the 2020 general election with things as they are now, we would be elected on data and figures dating back to 2000 in England and to 2001 in Scotland. That status quo is simply unacceptable.

There is also an historical injustice, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath highlighted. There has been a clarion call to address unequal seats for nearly 200 years, and this Government are determined to enact the historic principle of equal seats. At the moment, some seats are almost twice the size of others. For example, North West Cambridgeshire has around 90,000 electors and Manchester Central has around 87,000, compared with Wirral West, which has approximately 54,200, and Kensington, which has 55,400 electors.

The boundary changes will address the unfairness of these current parliamentary boundaries. In Scotland, the independent Boundary Commission publishes its provisional maps and figures tomorrow drawing up the new-sized constituencies. They are provisional data, and I would encourage anybody watching this debate to get involved in the consultation process; it is closing in England and Wales on 5 December. The independent Boundary Commission is currently touring the country and anyone who is interested in constituency boundary reform should get involved.

**Ian Blackford** (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Does the Minister accept that consideration must be given not only to the number of electors, but to geography? Constituencies such as mine in Scotland already have a landmass of 12,000 sq km. When we have constituencies that are so large, how on earth are we supposed to represent and be visible to all our constituents? This is not just about the numbers of electors; it has to be about geography and fairness for the electorate.

**Chris Skidmore**: When legislating on this, the previous Government absolutely recognised that point, and there is special provision in the current boundary proposals published tomorrow to protect Orkney and Shetland and the Western Isles, even though those constituencies are particularly small in voter numbers, given the wide area that they cover. Those remain unchanged. But let us look at the numbers for Scotland. Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross has an electorate of 45,898. In comparison, Linlithgow and East Falkirk has an electorate of 83,593. That is a difference of 37,695. There are almost twice as many electors. I cannot believe the SNP is defending having one elector whose vote is worth twice that of another; that is an historical injustice that this Government are determined to correct.

**Dr Paul Monaghan** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (SNP): I am the Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross. Why not reduce the size of seats to an electorate of 45,000 across the UK, instead of increasing them to 75,000?

**Chris Skidmore**: It is up to the independent commission to draw up the figures, but this Government are determined to ensure that we will be the Government to introduce the proposals first advanced in the clarion calls of the Charterists 200 years ago to have equal-sized constituencies and equal votes across the United Kingdom.

**Question put.**

The House divided: Ayes 245, Noes 278.

**Division No. 70**

AYES

1. Abrahams, Debbie
2. Ahmed-Sheikh, Ms Tasmina
3. Alexander, Heidi
4. Ali, Rushanara
5. Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena

A NOES

1. Anderson, Mr David
2. Arkless, Richard
3. Bailey, Mr Adrian
4. Bardell, Hannah
5. Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Bergen, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Bienkin, Tom
Blomfield, Paul
Boswell, Philip
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Mr Alan
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Cherry, Joanna
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coye, Neil
Crausby, Mr David
Crawley, Angela
Creasy, Stella
Craddas, Jon
Cryer, John
Cummings, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Danczuk, Simon
David, Wayne
Davies, Philip
Day, Martyn
De Piero, Gloria
Debonnaire, Thangam
Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Doughty, Stephen
Dowd, Jim
Dowd, Peter
Dromey, Jack
Dugher, Michael
Durkan, Mark
Eagle, Ms Angela
Edwards, Jonathan
Elford, Clive
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Elmore, Chris
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Farrelly, Paul
Farron, Tim
Ferrier, Margaret
Field, rh Frank
Fiellio, Robert
Fletcher, Colleen
Flynn, Paul
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Furniss, Gill
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Glindon, Mary
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Gwynne, Andrew
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hanson, rh Mr David
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Healey, rh John
Hendy, Drew
Hebbum, Mr Stephen
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howarth, rh Mr George
Hunt, Tristram
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Johnston, rh Alan
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham
Jones, Mr Kevan
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keelley, Barbara
Kendall, Liz
Keravan, George
Kerr, Calum
Kyle, Peter
Lamb, rh Norman
Lavery, Ian
Law, Chris
Leslie, Chris
Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Lucas, Caroline
Lucas, Ian C.
MacNeil, Mr Angus Brendan
MacTaggart, rh Fiona
Madders, Justin
Mahmood, Mr Khaid
Mahmood, Shabana
Malhotra, Seema
Mann, John
Marris, Rob
Marsden, Gordon
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCagg, Callum
McCarty, Kerry
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Stuart Malcolm
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGarry, Natalie
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McLaughlin, Anne
McMahon, Jim
Meale, Sir Alan
Mears, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Monaghan, Dr Paul
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morden, Jessica
Mulholland, Greg
Mullin, Roger
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Nicolson, John
O’Hara, Brendan
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Oswald, Kirsten
Owen, Albert
Paterson, Steven
Pearce, Teresa
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Toby
Phillips, Jess
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Pugh, John
Quershi, Yasmin
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Jamie
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reynolds, Emma
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Marie
Ritchie, Ms Margaret
Robertson, rh Angus
Robinson, Mr Geoffrey
Salmond, rh Alex
Shannon, Jim
Adams, Nigel
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allen, Heidi
Amess, Sir David
Andrew, Stuart
Ansell, Caroline
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriet
Barclay, Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Barwell, Gavin
Bebb, Guto
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, Richard
Berry, Jake
Berry, James
Bingham, Andrew
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
 Siddiq, Tulip
Skinner, Mr Dennis
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Spellar, rh Mr John
Stephens, Chris
Streeter, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, rh Ms Gisela
Tam, Mark
Theelliss, Alison
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thomson, Michelle
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Derek
Twigg, Stephen
Umunna, Mr Chuka
Watson, Mr Tom
Weir, Mike
West, Catherine
Whiteford, Dr Eliidh
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitford, Dr Philippa
Wilson, Corri
Wilson, Phil
Winnick, Mr David
Wishart, Pete
Wright, Mr Iain
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Marion Fellows and
Owen Thompson

NOES
Blackman, Bob
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
Burrows, Mr David
Carmichael, Neil
Carrington, James
Cash, Sir William
Cautfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
receive a letter from the Secretary of State this afternoon
competence over pensions. I was somewhat enraged to
excludes the possibility of the Scottish Parliament ha
v ing that section 28 of the Scotland Act 2016 specifically
Chair, if he would correct the record, knowing full well
to Scotland. I asked the Secretary of State, through the
that powers over pensions were coming
perhaps the Secretary of State knew something that we
generous in my choice of language and suggested that
of questions that day, I raised a point of order. I was
could use their powers to compensate them. At the end
about the Women Against State Pension Inequality
asked the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions
a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. On Monday, I
Stevenson, John
Spencer, Mark
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Smith, Julian
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Murray, Mrs Sheryl
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, Caroline
Norman, Jesse
Nuttall, Mr David
Offord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Paisley, Ian
Parish, Neil
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, Claire
Philip, Chris
Pickles, rh Sir Eric
Poufter, Dr Daniel
Poy, Rebecca
Prentis, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark
Purseglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, Mr Jacob
Robertson, Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ruud, rh Amber
Rutley, David
Sandbach, Antoinette
Scully, Paul
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, rh Grant
Simpson, rh Mr Keith
Skidmore, Chris
Smith, Henry
Smith, Julian
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Solloway, Amanda
Spelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob

Stewart, lain
Stewart, Rory
Streeter, Mr Gary
Stride, Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunki, Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo
Syms, Mr Robert
Thomas, Derek
Throup, Maggie
Timpson, Edward
Tohurston, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Mrs Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Turner, Mr Andrew
Tyrie, rh Mr Andrew
Vaikey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shailesh
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Mrs Theresa
Walker, Mr Robin
Wallace, Mr Ben
Warburton, David
Warman, Matt
Wharton, James
Whately, Helen
Wheeler, Heather
White, Chris
Whittaker, Craig
Whittingdale, rh Mr John
Wiggin, Bill
Williams, Craig
Williamson, rh Gavin
Wilson, Mr Rob
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Wood, Mike
Wrang, William
Wright, rh Jeremy

Tellers for the Noes:
Chris Heaton-Harris and
Christopher Pincher

7.12 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): On a point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. On Monday, I asked the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions about the Women Against State Pension Inequality Campaign and whether the Government were going to take mitigating measures to compensate the worst-affected women. He responded that the Scottish Government could use their powers to compensate them. At the end of questions that day, I raised a point of order. I was generous in my choice of language and suggested that perhaps the Secretary of State knew something that we did not—namely, that powers over pensions were coming to Scotland. I asked the Secretary of State, through the Chair, if he would correct the record, knowing full well that section 28 of the Scotland Act 2016 specifically excludes the possibility of the Scottish Parliament having competence over pensions. I was somewhat enraged to receive a letter from the Secretary of State this afternoon
which assures me that his statement was correct. We all know that people spin from time to time, but that is disingenuous to say the least, and the Secretary of State should really come clean and recognise that he has misled the House. I ask for your support as to how we can—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. First, we should not say that a Member is disingenuous or that they have misled the House. Let me see if I can be helpful here. Obviously there is a disagreement over the views and the interpretation, and I think that there is a way to deal with this—[Interruption.] Just bear with me. This could be helpful. You know me better than that. Give me a chance. There is a way to deal with this through the Procedure Committee, but it might be better to have a face-to-face debate in Westminster Hall. Why not put in for an Adjournment debate where this can be settled in the best possible way?

Ian Blackford: Further to that point of order, Mr Deputy Speaker. I am grateful for your advice, but there is an important issue here. The Secretary of State is giving a level of competence to the Scottish Parliament and the Scottish Government that they do not have, and it is important that we in this House have the opportunity to call him to account. I say clearly that he was wrong and that he should correct the record.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I understand that he says he is wrong; the hon. Gentleman has made that point. What I am saying is that a face-to-face debate would be a much better way to put the case and get the answers. That is the way forward. There is also the option of the Procedure Committee, but I think that a face-to-face debate would be a much better way to set out categorically where the answer lies.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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

Constitutional Law

That the draft Bankruptcy (Scotland) Act 2016 (Consequential Provisions and Modifications) Order 2016, which was laid before this House on 13 July, be approved.—(Graham Stuart.)

Question agreed to.

Petition

Student Season Tickets on the Lakes Line

7.16 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I rise to present a petition regarding student season tickets on the Lakes Line on behalf of sixth-form students in Westmorland from Windermere, Staveley, Burneside and Kendal, calling for a fair price for rail travel to school.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that Northern Rail has taken a decision to remove post-16 students from the student season tickets system on the Lakes Line; further that students face a massive increase in the cost of travel, which will mean that the journey to Sixth Form in Kendal will become unaffordable for many; and further that an online petition on a similar topic has received 308 signatures.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage Northern Rail to rethink the decision to remove post-16 students from the student season tickets system on the Lakes Line.

And the petitioners remain, etc.
Railway Stations: Car Parking Charges

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

7.17 pm

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): I am grateful for the opportunity to raise in the House the specific issue of the increase in parking charges at Rugby station that took place on 5 September and was imposed by the operator of the west coast main line, Virgin Trains. At the same time, I want to consider the broader consequences that the lack of restriction on rail operators’ ability to increase car parking charges may have on our transport network.

There are many reasons why this topic is of great importance to Rugby. The rail connection is important to our local economy. Businesses locate there for many reasons, one of which is good access to London—Rugby benefits from a 50-minute journey time on the west coast main line to Euston. The number of people who commute to London, Coventry and Birmingham and use the line on a daily basis is increasing. That increase can be seen in how much the station is used, which has pretty much doubled since 2007-08, when 1.16 million entries and exits were recorded, to 2.04 million in 2014-15.

The provision of parking at Rugby station has increased as passenger numbers have increased, but a significant milestone in the development of Rugby station was the west coast main line modernisation that took place in 2008. The vast improvement in reliability and journey times was welcomed by the many people in Rugby who use the line. Prior to the modernisation, the parking was originally on the south side of the station—the town side—in car parks one and two, but there has always been a tradition of private operators making use of vacant sites in the vicinity. In many cases, that competition provided by the local, independent operator. Many of the comparisons that it gave me were from car parks at other stations—Virgin referred to Coventry and tried to imply that its car park offered better value for money because it had better facilities.

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There are many locally operated car parks where the prices are considerably cheaper. For example, Warwick Parkway on the Chiltern line charges £5 a day. In looking around, I found one or two other areas where commuter stations have significantly cheaper prices. For example, commuters in Hungerford, Berkshire, are charged just £2.40 to park their car. I wonder whether the more relevant comparison for Virgin might be other car parks in and around Rugby. In the John Barford multi-storey car park in the town centre, there is a daily rate of £5. Virgin says that the removal of off-peak rates demonstrates that there is a need for further provision. I wonder whether it is taking advantage of the fact that the car park is pretty full by hiking up rates quite substantially.

I do not accept the premise that the places in Rugby are taken up by non-rail users. The station is too far from the town centre. In any event, it is not difficult for the operator to link the car park ticket to the purchase of a rail ticket, thereby making certain that non-rail users are excluded.

Mr Cunningham: The point about Coventry station being nearer the town centre is a bit of a misnomer. Most people who use that station come from the outskirts of Coventry—a mile and a half or two miles from some of the more distant parts of Coventry—and, to some extent, from some of the surrounding areas. That is a bit of a red herring.

Mark Pawsey: I hear the hon. Gentleman’s views, but it should not be difficult to link the price of the parking to the purchase of a rail ticket. That would ensure that the provision that has been made for rail users is actually taken up by rail users.

One thing that is certainly happening as the price has gone up in Rugby is that people are going on a wider search for free parking. In my constituency, we had a real problem with people parking on a newly developed road, on Technology Drive, which led to all sorts of road safety problems. We have now managed to introduce double yellow lines there. I did ask one driver why they parked there. They said that they were doing so to save £6. Now that saving is £9, and there is an even bigger incentive to look around further for places to park.

The rate of increase imposed by Virgin is unreasonable. I accept that there might have been a need for an increase, but 50% is very substantial. As the hon. Gentleman pointed out, commuters’ salaries have not increased at that rate. Many constituents have told me that the cost of parking often exceeds the price of rail travel. The shorter the journey, the greater the proportion of their journey cost is taken up in parking. That applies to people going to Coventry and Rugby. If I park my car on Sunday evening to travel to work and return to Rugby on Thursday, I pay five times £9, which is £45, to park, but a super off peak ticket including zone 1, which has some restrictions on use, costs £38. It is crazy that the cost of parking should exceed the cost of rail travel.

I do recognise the need for the operator to recover its investment. The car park was clearly expensive to develop, but the increase is disproportionate. It involved no consultation and inadequate notice. I wonder whether the operator takes seriously its role of providing parking as part of an integrated transport network. At Rugby station there is lots of travel advice and there are lots of leaflets, but I could find no information about parking charges. To a non-regular user, £9 will come as a shock.

I fear that high parking charges will lead to greater congestion on our already busy road network. I was interested to read the article in The Sunday Times at the weekend drawing attention to congestion having increased by 40% in four years. High parking charges are an incentive for people to use their cars, especially for shorter journeys. For a Rugby resident who travels five days a week, it would cost £45 per week to park their car, whereas the use of the M6 or the A45 is free. We are forcing people off the rail network, into their cars and on to the motorways. In addition, high charges for car parks encourage people to be dropped off and collected at the station, which adds to congestion around stations. At Rugby station, access is already a challenge, and high parking charges are only making the problem worse.

In his reply, the Minister told me that the Government have control over fares, but not over parking. The Government regulate roughly half of all rail fares and apply that principle to car parking charges as well? In the light of the recent changes at Rugby station, is it fair and reasonable for the charge to be increased by 50%?

Mr Cunningham: Another factor is the investment in Coventry and Warwickshire. I know that the hon. Gentleman has done as much work on the issue as the Coventry MPs. Any leader of a local authority will be asked about parking because that adds to costs, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman knows. It is an important factor in the development of the local economy of Coventry and Warwickshire.

Mark Pawsey: Absolutely. We want to see more effective use of our public transport network. What is wrong with including car parking and the ability to control car parking charges in the franchise? There is a strong case for a joined-up approach to protect passengers. I look forward to the Minister’s response.

7.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby (Mark Pawsey) on securing this debate, on a subject close to his heart. As he pointed out, he wrote to me only last month to set out his concerns and those of the Rugby Rail Users Group. As he rightly points out, I park at Virgin Preston on the west coast, where price rises—admittedly, of only 20%—came in last July, so I am not personally insensitive to the points that he makes.

I am sure my hon. Friend will be aware that station car parking is not a simple matter, particularly in view of the fact that we have not more than 2,500 stations of all sizes across the country that link the railway with the communities and people they serve. Clearly, they provide the first and last impressions of the railway and often of the communities themselves, so every station needs to provide passengers with a safe, accessible and comfortable experience. A good station should also serve the wider community with social, retail and leisure facilities.
can and should go beyond their traditional role as portals to the rail network, and should be fully integrated, as my hon. Friend mentioned, into local transport networks to make multimodal travel far simpler. They should be catalysts for local development and play an important role in supporting local economic growth.

I urge all local enterprise partnerships and councils to think about how they, too, can support the provision of better car parking across the rail network. In that context, we can all recognise just how crucial car parks are, not least in enabling passengers to access the rail network, by parking their cars close to the station in a safe, convenient car park. That is why it is important that train operators have the flexibility to set commercially viable car park fees.

If fees are too low, the operator will provide lower returns to the Government, thereby increasing the taxpayer contribution to the railways. If fees are too high, however, the car park will be underused, and that, too, will lead to lower premium payments to the Government. A commercially flexible rate allows maximum revenue to be derived from car parking income, which reduces the requirement for taxpayer support for the franchise. It is important to stress that car park charges are not just a tool for revenue generation, but provide an important foundation for investment in not just trains but stations.

Let me try to specifically address the issues in Rugby. As my hon. Friend recollects from our reply to him, the Government do not own the car parks; train companies and others—local councils, for example—do, and that varies across the country. I am sure Virgin will have noted his criticisms of the communication strategy it adopted and of whether it has adequate capacity at Rugby and, indeed, at Coventry and other stations across its network.

Virgin West Coast has received a number of complaints from passengers that the station car park was always full. On investigation, it became apparent that the charges were much lower than in the surrounding areas and that the station car park was being used by non-rail users. I should just stress that my comments in my reply were specifically about Rugby, not about Preston, and that is what we were told by Virgin.

In a bid to be more helpful than that reply might have indicated, let me say that my hon. Friend might be interested to know that the Rail Delivery Group, which represents the train operating companies, is looking at how to better measure the passenger experience, because the group, along with the Government, recognises that it does not just start when a passenger boards a train. The group is looking at the entire range of ways that the passenger interacts with the railway network. That will include not just buying a ticket before they get to the station, causing problems for residents. That will be a grave danger that if car parking charges are disproportionate, that will encourage more car use and disincentive to catch a train, I hope we can start to bring fees into line with those in other car parks in all local economic areas. We want to encourage investment in car parking and, moreover, to drive better value for money across all station facilities. That can partly be done through franchise competitions, and that will include the forthcoming west coast franchise competition, where we will challenge bidders to innovate in how they seek to provide car parking. We will look at how they want to improve facilities at stations for all users.

We are already doing a lot to improve car parking as part of the wider passenger experience. Train operating companies will need to take a much longer-term view of managing station assets than they do at the moment—over 40 years, rather than just the existing franchise length. That will include car parks, and it will mean incremental improvements continually to the quality and standard of the facilities on offer. Investment patterns will now start to mirror not just a train operator’s franchise term, but the lifespan of the bit of infrastructure that the train operating company will be investing in. That will not mean just a lack of potholes; it might mean more innovative ways to deliver car parking that meet the passengers’ needs.

We are also conducting a review of security and safety in our car parks and stations, because a well-lit, well-maintained car park, covered by CCTV, provides passengers with reassurance not only that they are safe at a station but that the price of their parking fee and travel ticket has been reinvested back into the railway.

Innovation is also crucial. That is why I am looking to train operating companies to make it easier for the passenger to pre-book a parking space, so that they have certainty when they arrive at the station that they will be able to park without difficulty; nor will they need to delay their journey or risk missing their train by having to use complicated coin-operated payment machines that may or may not be out of order. We will also seek to make far better use of station travel plans, which my hon. Friend mentioned, so that passengers understand the options that are available to them in how they reach the station that best meets their needs and is the most sustainable method of transport.

Mark Pawsey: I welcome the Minister’s remarks, but will he address the broader integrated view? There is a grave danger that if car parking charges are disproportionate, that will encourage more car use and encourage people to seek to park for free around the station, causing problems for residents.

Paul Maynard: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The impact will differ from station to station across the network. The stations that I am familiar with all have their own quirks and differences in terms of how local people utilise them, approach them, park, drop passengers off, and so on. This can have a substantial impact on the local road network. It is very important that train operators work together with local highway authorities to plan the local road network immediately around the station to make sure that no passenger is inconvenienced. I can think of many cases at peak
hours where, all too often, we have traffic jams. I hope that train operating companies will hear my plea for them to work far more closely with the local highway authority to plan traffic flow and ensure that, wherever problems can be minimised, we seek to do so.

As I keep saying, we need to continue to invest in our station facilities.

Mr Jim Cunningham rose—

Paul Maynard: I will happily give way. I was about to talk about Coventry.

Mr Cunningham: The Minister said that he hoped that the train operators would take note of what he says. May I suggest, in the nicest possible way, that it would not be a bad idea to take our concerns to a meeting with the train operators’ representatives?

Paul Maynard: I should praise the hon. Gentleman for almost being psychic in predicting what I was about to say. I am more than happy to have that conversation next time I meet Virgin West Coast, which I try to do as frequently as I can. Only today, I heard about some of the interesting plans in Coventry for a new boulevard into the town centre and potential new car parking facilities that, by expanding capacity, might allow costs to come down. Coventry is having an interesting time. I gather that in Rugby there is also substantial investment in cycle-rail facilities, which help to ensure that people have more options in how they get to the station, including bicycle hire. That is a good step forward.

Mr Cunningham: The Minister will know that in Coventry we have the NUCKLE project, which we are hoping to get started very soon. That has taken about 10 years to get off the ground.

Paul Maynard: I am always happy to hear news of Coventry’s progress. My visits to Coventry are probably in my diary as we speak, without my even knowing about it. I look forward to going there.

I recognise that capacity, as much as anything else, is often key in car parks around stations. It is important to design them to allow extra decks to be placed on top with greater flexibility, because demand is going to keep on growing as more and more people use our railways. We also need to redesign stations themselves better to reflect passenger flows through them. Many of these stations are Victorian and often have not been updated since that time. We will always need to invest in our railways and to change and adapt to face that increasing demand.

I am sure that my hon. Friend the Member for Rugby recognises that such extensive change cannot happen overnight, but I hope that he and his constituents will see the change in the station environment at Rugby—as at Coventry and elsewhere—that long-term investment can bring. I hope that I have laid out some aspects of how we are seeking to re-evaluate the entire spectrum of the passenger experience, so that we capture every interaction between passenger and rail network to make sure that, where there is dissatisfaction, we as a Government not only become aware of it but start to use it as a tool to drive up improvements on behalf of the passenger through the franchising mechanism. I will be more than happy to report back to him once I have spoken again to Virgin West Coast.

Question put and agreed to.

7.44 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Thursday 20 October 2016

The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

The Secretary of State was asked—

Financial Services

1. Mrs Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): What discussions has he had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on financial services and negotiations on the UK leaving the EU. [906687]

10. Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): What progress his Department has made in engaging with the financial services sector on the potential effect on its revenues of the UK leaving the EU. [906697]

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): The Chancellor and I are both determined to ensure we get the best possible deal for our financial services sector—a crucial part of our economy—and not just for the City of London but for the country more widely. Two thirds of financial services jobs are outside the capital, including 150,000 in Scotland.

We are determined to ensure that this UK-wide industry continues to thrive. The Chancellor and I have met to discuss this, and, as one would expect, agree that financial services will be of great importance in these negotiations, that we must remain in a position to attract the brightest and the best in the global battle for talent, and that we will seek the best possible terms of trade for our financial services in the European market. We are also working together to maximise opportunities for financial services arising from our exit from the European Union. We have already met representatives of the financial services industry and expect to do so again as we shape our negotiating position.

Mrs Villiers: Will my right hon. Friend make sure making an agreement on a transitional period for financial services an urgent priority for Brexit negotiations to avoid the risk that firms feel they have to start making decisions to change their businesses now based on a worst-case scenario because compliance obligations mean that they cannot wait to see what the final deal will look like?

Mr Davis: We are seeking to ensure a smooth and orderly exit from the European Union, and it would not be in the interests of either side—Britain or the European Union—to see disruption. To that end, we are examining all possible options, as one would expect. We are approaching these negotiations in good faith and with good will towards our negotiating partners—we hope the same applies in reverse—focused on the mutual interests of the UK and the EU, including financial stability. I would say that having London as the No. 1 global financial centre sitting at the heart of the global capital markets is not just in the UK’s interest but in the European Union’s interest. I am confident that everyone will see the value of not undermining that.

Stephen Hammond: In his answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Mrs Villiers), the Secretary of State talked about all possible options. Yesterday in the Treasury Committee, I asked the Chancellor whether he accepted the likely need for transitional arrangements. Has my right hon. Friend met regulators to discuss systemic risk, and major financial institutions to discuss loss of business, if those transitional arrangements are not put in place?

Mr Davis: The Chancellor’s response was much the same as mine will be. Yes, we have been talking to the European institutions, in particular, about this matter, and they take the same view as we do.

Hilary Benn (Leeds Central) (Lab): We look forward to hearing from the Secretary of State once the new Select Committee has been established. May I press him on transitional arrangements, which are absolutely fundamental to the task in hand? He will be too well aware that uncertainty about our future trading relationships, including for the financial services industry, is the major concern of business. Can he give the House an assurance that if we have not been able to negotiate a new trade and market access agreement with the European Union by the end of the article 50 process, the Government will seek a transitional arrangement, because if they do not say that now the business uncertainty will continue, and businesses may begin to take decisions because they do not know what the future holds?

Mr Davis: I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his new post. I am very pleased that he is the Chairman of the Brexit Committee, and look forward to a great deal of discussion with him on these subjects. He is quite right—we have to treat as absolutely central to what we do maintaining the stability of the City but also of the European financial markets, which have been a little fragile over the past few years. We will therefore do anything necessary. In the financial sector, as in other sectors, at the point of exit from the European Union, all the standards, conventions and regulations will be identical, so the transition should be capable of being managed very clinically. We will do everything necessary to maintain that stability.

Mr Pat McFadden (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): Can the Secretary of State confirm, in relation to press reports earlier this week, that the Government may in future pay the European Union, in some form or another, for access to financial services? Is it the Government’s position that under no circumstances will they in future pay for market access for financial services?
Mr Davis: I do not comment on leaks. I am not going to comment on that newspaper report or, indeed, on its veracity or otherwise. On the accountability of Government activity, I said during last week’s debate that I want to be as accountable and open as possible with the House of Commons, but the Labour party accepted enthusiastically the amendment to the motion, which said that we would do nothing to undermine or prejudge our negotiating position, and that is what we will do.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): Rather disgracefully, the Treasury did its best to play a prominent role in the remain campaign, including the release of a highly dodgy dossier predicting economic doom and gloom. Is my right hon. Friend confident that the Treasury has now caught up with the result of the referendum and that it is singing from the same page as his Department?

Mr Davis: I am afraid that I do not agree with my hon. Friend. The simple truth is that the Treasury is looking at all the options, just as we are. Forecasts of the sorts that he described are contingent entirely on the assumptions that are put under them. If a lot of deleterious assumptions are made, they will result in a deleterious outcome. If serious policies are introduced to correct any of the risks and maximise the opportunities, they will result in a very much better outcome, and that is what we will do.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): The Secretary of State has said that he does not want to discuss leaks, but it is important that we get factual information out there. According to the Financial Times, the Government are to spend billions on keeping the City of London in the single market. Will the Secretary of State confirm what steps he is taking to ensure that the people of Scotland get a similar deal?

Mr Davis: As I have said, I do not comment on leaks, but what I will say is this: I said at the beginning that a very large number of financial services jobs are outside London and many of them are concentrated in Scotland. It has been a fundamental part of Scotland’s advantage down the years to have strong financial services, and we will do every bit as much to protect Scotland as we will to protect London.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Tens of thousands of jobs in Britain depend on euro-denominated clearing. The United States has secured equivalence for its clearing houses. How confident is the Secretary of State that euro-denominated clearing will be permitted in the UK after we have left the European Union?

Mr Davis: The right hon. Gentleman identifies a very important point, as I would expect from him, and that is certainly one of our major aims. I reiterate the point that I made to the new Chairman of the Brexit Committee: we start at the point we leave with absolute equivalence, because we meet all of the requirements at that point, and I would seek to ensure that that was maintained.

Keir Starmer: The question was: when will the plans be made available? For the second time, it has not been answered. The plans are important not only so that this House can hold the Government to account, but so that some certainty can be provided. There has been so much evidence of uncertainty. I met representatives of the Council, Commission and Parliament in Brussels yesterday, and it is absolutely clear that the Prime Minister’s words about Brexit at her party conference have been widely interpreted as an indication that she wants the UK to leave not just the single market, but the customs union. I have no doubt that that will come up in her discussions in Brussels this evening, but will the Secretary of State assure the House that that is not the Government’s starting position for the article 50 negotiations?

Mr Davis: I could not have been clearer that I consider engagement with Parliament on the process of exiting the EU to be of paramount importance. That was the whole thrust of my speech in last week’s debate and of everything I said previously to various Select Committees and to the House. That is why I supported the Opposition’s motion last week that “there should be a full and transparent debate on the Government’s plan for leaving the EU”.

That was the hon. and learned Gentleman’s wording. It has always been our intention that Parliament should be engaged throughout. However, the House also agreed a vital caveat that such a process must respect “the decision of the people of the UK when they voted to leave the EU on 23 June and does not undermine the negotiating position of the Government”.

There will be a balance to be struck between transparency and good negotiating practice, and I am confident that we can strike that balance. Over the course of the coming six months or less, I do not know, but over the course of the coming period before the triggering of article 50, much information will be put out and I think that the House will be in no doubt about our aims and strategic objectives.

Keir Starmer: The question was: when will the plans be made available? For the second time, it has not been answered. The plans are important not only so that this House can hold the Government to account, but so that some certainty can be provided. There has been so much evidence of uncertainty. I met representatives of the Council, Commission and Parliament in Brussels yesterday, and it is absolutely clear that the Prime Minister’s words about Brexit at her party conference have been widely interpreted as an indication that she wants the UK to leave not just the single market, but the customs union. I have no doubt that that will come up in her discussions in Brussels this evening, but will the Secretary of State assure the House that that is not the Government’s starting position for the article 50 negotiations?

Mr Davis: Actually, it is a good example of the reason why we are taking our time to come to a conclusion on this. [Laughter.] No, these matters have serious implications, whichever way we go with them. Being inside the customs union gives some advantages but cuts off, to some extent, free trade areas around the rest of the world. Being outside the customs union creates
some handicaps but opens up those other benefits. That decision is not part of what the Prime Minister has said to the European Union.

**Welsh Economy**

2. Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): What assessment he has made of the potential effect on the economy in Wales of the UK leaving the EU.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): The Government continue to undertake a wide range of analysis covering all parts of the UK to inform the UK’s position for the upcoming negotiation with the European partners. A key part of that understanding is the differences across the UK. The Welsh economy has particular strengths in aerospace, automotive, higher education, electronics, steel and agriculture, for example. It is important that we understand the impacts and the opportunities for all parts of the Welsh economy.

I visited Cardiff on Tuesday this week, when I met the First Minister and the Finance Minister, and I am grateful to them for giving me time on their Budget day. I also met university vice-chancellors in a separate meeting. Wales has a particular reliance on a range of EU funding—more so than much of the rest of the UK—on which the Chancellor has already offered a number of guarantees.

Jonathan Edwards: As the Secretary of State will be aware, the Welsh economy produces a substantial trade surplus of more than £5 billion per annum as a result of our membership of the single market, the customs union and the associated 53 international global trade deals. The UK as a whole, on the other hand, has a massive deficit of nearly £120 billion. Does the Secretary of State acknowledge, therefore, that the Government’s favoured policy of leaving the single market, the customs union and the associated 53 international global trade deals—a hard Brexit—will have a significant effect on Wales?

Mr Davis: No, because the Government’s aim is to maintain the freest and most barrier-free access to the single market that we can obtain. That is the aim, and parts of the kingdom such as Wales are very much at the forefront of our thoughts in that strategy.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Many businesses in Wales are wondering how EU directives that have been signed but not yet enacted—some may not be enacted until 2017 or 2018—will impact on them. At what stage will the Government say that directives are no longer applicable in the UK?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend makes an important point, which goes to the heart of the previous question about maintaining stability and confidence. We have said in terms that the great repeal Act will put into domestic law all the acquis as it exists at the point at which we depart. Everything that is in European law at that point goes into British law.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): In Blaenau Gwent, the successful dips company Zorba Foods faces a bigger bill for bringing its ingredients into the country. With petrol prices going up, the falling pound is making every step of the journey to the dinner plate much more expensive. What are the Government doing to help businesses that are faced with a steep increase in costs and families who are faced with higher food bills?

Mr Davis: It is not the place of the Government to judge what is the right and wrong exchange rate. The hon. Gentleman is quite right to say that the exchange rate has gone down quite notably, but that gives both advantages and disadvantages. It has already changed, for example, the success of various industries in exports and some other domestic industries. We hope—more than that, we intend—that the balance will work out to everybody’s advantage in the long run.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): Yesterday, I was delighted to hear the Under-Secretary of State for Wales confirm that the Treasury will underwrite the approximately £110 million that is due to come from the EU regional development fund for the electrification of the valleys lines in Wales if that money has not come through before we exit the European Union. In his discussions with the First Minister, was the Secretary of State able to give him greater clarity about all the funds that come into Wales from the EU? Businesses require that stable background against which to operate.

Mr Davis: My right hon. Friend picks up on a very important point. Wales is more dependent on European funding at the moment than many other parts of the country. One of the set of things the Government have done to protect people from any instability is to underwrite very quickly—the Treasury undertook to do this in August—the existing structural funds. The Welsh Government were cognisant of that and welcomed it, particularly as they—as I said, I visited them on budget day—were able to make their budgets balance. From that point of view, the Government will continue to look at any areas where financial risk is induced as a result of our departure and the possible severance of EU funds as we leave.

**Business Revenue**

3. Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): What progress his Department has made in engaging with businesses on the potential effect on their revenues of the UK leaving the EU.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): Since the referendum, the Government have met companies from every sector of the British economy, including tourism, to discuss the risks and opportunities. I believe that as we build an ever more outward-facing, agile economy, with firms trading more widely across the world, there is enormous potential for the UK to be an even better place to do business. We are meeting representatives of business regularly, and the detailed analysis shared with us by many of them is informing the preparations for the negotiations.
On tourism specifically, foreign visitors contribute £22 billion to our economy, and the industry as a whole supports some 1.6 million jobs. A record 3.8 million people visited the UK in July. My right hon. Friend the Culture Secretary has met industry leaders to discuss our exit from the EU, and we debated this matter in Westminster Hall last week. As the Prime Minister has said, we are confident our exit presents opportunities for growth in tourism, and we will work closely with the industry to realise this.

Nigel Mills: Businesses in Amber Valley say that what would help them most in deciding what investment to make in the coming years is some clarity about what our overall trading position with the EU will be. They are nervous that waiting two and a half years for that will not be helpful. When does the Secretary of State think they will be able to understand at least what the big picture will be?

Mr Davis: At the strategic level, businesses should be able to understand that very clearly now. We have some very clear strategic aims: we will respect the views of the British people—I know my hon. Friend campaigns on our side—to bring back control over our laws and bring back control of immigration; we will aim to maintain our consideration of security exactly as it is now; and on the market front, we are seeking the most open possible market with the European Union.

Nigel Huddleston: I thank the Secretary of State for his comments about engaging with the tourism industry. As he said, we are achieving record visitor numbers and record spend. To sustain this growth, should we investigate budgets for VisitBritain, for example?

Mr Davis: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the excellent debate he held last week, and indeed on his excellent speech on this subject. He is right that the industry continues to thrive, with 3.8 million people visiting the UK. I am quite certain—that is helping to drive our tech sector in the UK?

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree with the International Trade Secretary that we should leave the European customs union, or with the Business Secretary and the Chancellor that we should not do so?

Mr Davis: I gave the answer to that some moments ago.

Emma Reynolds (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): The Secretary of State talks about a smooth transition, but the truth is that businesses are concerned we will have to fall back on WTO rules. Our European partners have so far refused to say that they will enter trade talks alongside our article 50 negotiations. What will the Government and the Secretary of State do to avoid the cliff edge in March 2019, when we leave the EU, of our falling out of the EU single market and back on WTO rules?

Mr Davis: The hon. Lady says that our European partners have said that. Some of them have said it, but that was some time ago, and they are now starting to read what article 50 actually says. Article 50 implies that there will be parallel negotiations. That is what we will have because, as she quite rightly says, we need to conclude them within two years to avoid any cliff edge.

18. [096707] Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): My constituency is home to the Cambridge science park, a centre of innovation and technology. Last week, I met David Newble, the chief executive of TTP Labtech, who is concerned about maintaining access to overseas talent, following the vote for Brexit. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that we continue to attract the international expertise that is helping to drive our tech sector in the UK?

Mr Davis: My hon. and learned Friend might remember that I said in my conference speech that to take part in the global competitive economy we have to win the global battle for talent, too. My task is to bring back to the UK the right to decide who can come to Britain; the Government’s task will be to exercise that right in the national interest. Clearly, it will not be in the national interest to restrict the movement of talent—the free movement of brainpower, as it were—so she can be confident that we will not be limiting highly intelligent, highly capable people’s access to universities.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): Will the Secretary of State tell us what assessment his or any other Department has made of the impact of leaving the EU on the economy, and when he will make that available to this House?

Mr Davis: We currently have in place an assessment of 51 sectors of the economy. We are looking at those one by one, but the aim at the end is that this will inform the negotiating approach so that no one gets hurt. Given the hon. Gentleman’s context, I should mention that we are also doing that assessment in a way that will throw up whether something has an impact on the individual nations of the United Kingdom, as well as on the UK as a whole.

Stephen Gethins: I obviously welcome that new information from the Secretary of State, but the Fraser of Allander Institute has already told us that this will cost up to 80,000 jobs in Scotland alone. The CBI, the British Chambers of Commerce and the Institute of Directors have warned about the impact of limiting freedom of movement. They have done their homework, Secretary of State. You did not do your homework during the Vote Leave campaign, when you had a blank piece of paper to campaign on. If the Secretary of State is going to Scotland, he will need to do better than that. When will that assessment be published?

Mr Speaker: I have always done my homework, and I strongly resent any suggestion to the contrary.

Mr Davis: I venture to suggest that if you did your homework, Mr Speaker, you would not have it marked by the hon. Gentleman. I have not seen the Fraser of Allander report, so would be grateful if the hon. Gentleman directed me to it. One thing about these reports is that they all base themselves on single assumptions. We need to look at
those assumptions to see whether they are realistic, and that is what we will do. There have been a large number of forecasts of the effect of Brexit. Some are very pessimistic about certain aspects of policy that we do not intend to allow to happen. I will look at that particular report carefully and talk to him about it after I have done so.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): The US Chamber of Commerce, which represents companies with investments in the UK worth almost $600 billion, warned our ambassador in Washington last week that to retain and attract those investments in the years ahead we will require access to the single market. Will the Secretary of State tell the House whether he accepts the figure I have given and, if he does not, how much US business investment he thinks will be at risk if this Government do not secure access to the single market?

Mr Davis: One reason—although only one—why we are seeking to maintain the most open and barrier-free access possible to the European market is to encourage foreign direct investment. We have had discussions with a number of countries, including the US; indeed I met a US congressional delegation that came here whose members were very enthusiastic about Brexit. There are many views about this.

EU Regional Funding

4. Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): What discussions has he had with his Cabinet colleagues on EU regional funding as part of his preparations for negotiations on the UK leaving the EU.

The Minister of State, Department for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Jones): The Chancellor has already announced that the Government will guarantee EU structural and investment funding signed before we leave the EU. In addition, when UK organisations bid directly and competitively for EU funding for projects, that funding will be guaranteed by the Treasury if the bids are won before our departure. Those guarantees will extend to 2020, effectively the end of this Parliament.

Wayne David: The Minister has quoted part of what the Chancellor said, but he also said that finance will be guaranteed to bidders “whose projects meet UK priorities”. Does that imply that the UK Government will try to change agreed priorities for EU expenditure?

Mr Jones: No. Over the coming months the Government will consult all interested parties—including the devolved Administrations, who clearly have an interest in this policy—to ensure that future funding commitments represent value for money and are in line with our strategic priorities.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend is right. This particular area, like many other aspects of policy, gives the United Kingdom the opportunity to reassess these arrangements and ensure that they meet the UK’s priorities.

UK Citizens in EU Countries: Rights

5. Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): What rights he plans to secure for UK citizens living in other EU countries; and whether he plans to negotiate a reciprocal agreement with EU partners on the rights of EU citizens living in the UK.

12. Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): What rights he plans to secure for UK citizens living in other EU countries; and whether he plans to negotiate a reciprocal agreement with EU partners on the rights of EU citizens living in the UK.

13. Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Whether it is his policy to allow EU nationals living in the UK to remain after the UK leaves the EU.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Basildon and East Thurrock (Stephen Metcalfe) on his election as Chair of the Science and Technology Committee.

We had a very good debate on this matter yesterday and it was clear that Members on both sides of the House wanted to provide reassurance. The Government fully intend to protect the status of EU nationals already living here and the Prime Minister has been clear on that point. We expect UK citizens’ rights in other EU member states to be protected in return. I find it hard to imagine a scenario where, in negotiations, that is not the outcome. At every step of the negotiations, we will seek to ensure the best possible outcomes for the British people at home and overseas.

Stephen Metcalfe: To follow on from the question asked by my hon. and learned Friend the Member for South East Cambridgeshire (Lucy Frazer), the Government have made clear their desire to control the borders and the fact that free movement cannot continue as it is now. However, will my hon. Friend reiterate that a degree of free movement will be necessary to protect key areas of our economy such as science and technology, and in particular research collaboration?

Mr Walker: I absolutely recognise my hon. Friend’s point and the need to strike that balance. As the Secretary of State said in his conference speech, to which he has already referred, pulling out of the European Union does not mean pulling up the drawbridge. He said: “We will always welcome those with the skills, the drive and the expertise to make our nation better still. If we are to win in the global marketplace, we must win the global battle for talent. Britain has always been one of the most tolerant and welcoming places on the face of the earth. It must and it will remain so.” This is particularly true in areas such as science and technology. The UK is a science superpower and we intend to make sure it stays that way.

Mike Wood: As well as ensuring that British pensioners living in other EU countries retain the right to remain in those countries, will the Government make sure that their pensions are protected under their current terms?
Mr Walker: My hon. Friend raises an important point. Clearly, this is something that we will want to secure in the negotiations. We are working on the basis that what is fair to UK citizens in the EU should also be fair to EU citizens in the UK. We will certainly be looking to protect the interests of British pensioners as we go through this process.

Peter Grant: The most recent census indicates that 1,588 of my constituents were born in other EU countries. From personal experience, I know that they include doctors, dentists, teachers, nurses, home care workers, residential care workers, pupil support assistants and many more. Why are the Government already able to give unilateral guarantees about the remaining rights of bankers but unable to give the same guarantees to my constituents?

Mr Walker: We are clear that it is important to secure the rights of EU citizens in the UK and UK citizens in the EU. We will seek to do so through the negotiations.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The Minister is seeking to brush a way concerns about this issue. Last month, the British Chambers of Commerce reported that 41% of companies said that their staff had expressed uncertainty about their future. Across the country, EU staff in our universities, who make up 15% of academics and contribute hugely to our research, are reconsidering their position. NHS England’s chief executive is so concerned that he has called for early reassurance about the future of EU workers. Will the Government simply resolve this uncertainty by committing to implement the decision of this House on 6 July and acting with urgency to give EU nationals currently living in the UK the right to remain?

Mr Walker: As I said in yesterday’s debate, the Government recognise the enormous contribution that EU citizens make to our health service, our universities and business. We want to ensure that their rights are protected, but we need to do so through the process of negotiation and agreement.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): Will the Minister now answer the question from my hon. Friend the Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant)? Why was the Chancellor yesterday, in front of the Treasury Committee, able to give an unambiguous guarantee about the travel and residential rights of bankers that he is not prepared to give to our hard-working fellow European citizens?

Mr Walker: When the right hon. Gentleman intervened on me in yesterday’s debate, I had a sneaking suspicion that he might be, perhaps inadvertently, misrepresenting the comments of the Chancellor to the Select Committee. Having read the transcript, it is clear that the Chancellor was making it clear that his role was to advocate on this in the policy discussions to come with the Home Office and other Departments. He was not doing as the right hon. Gentleman says.

Devolution of Immigration: Scottish Government

6. John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): If he will devolve control over immigration to the Scottish Government as part of his negotiations on the UK leaving the EU.

The Minister of State, Department for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Jones): Immigration is a reserved matter. However, we are working closely with the Scottish Government and we will get the best possible deal for all parts of the United Kingdom as we leave the EU. We will give the Scottish Government every opportunity to have their say as we develop the negotiating strategy.

John Nicolson: During the European Union referendum, the former Justice Secretary, the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), said that Scotland could decide its own immigration policy in the event of Brexit. Was that proposal defenestrated at the same time as the former Minister?

Mr Jones: As I have indicated, immigration is a reserved matter, but as I have also indicated, we will continue to have discussions with all the devolved Administrations, including the Scottish Government, and there will in due course, as the matter develops, be discussions about where powers should lie.

London

7. Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): What discussions has he had with the Mayor of London on protecting London’s interests during negotiations on the UK leaving the EU.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): London is a great global city and we expect it to continue to be so. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will join me in welcoming the record-breaking jobs figures for London that were published yesterday—I think they show the lowest rate of unemployment in London in our lifetime. The Secretary of State has already met the Mayor of London and we expect to hold meetings with regions across the UK to ensure that their views are taken into account.

Wes Streeting: I am sure the Minister welcomes the LondonIsOpen campaign led by the Mayor of London, so will he give a commitment today that he will look with an open mind at the case being developed by London’s business community for a work permit system for London that would enable us to continue to recruit the best and the brightest talent from around the world?

Mr Walker: The precise way in which the Government will control the movement to the UK of EU nationals and people from around the world is something that we will be working on with the Home Office. We will certainly take into account representations from London and other devolved areas, but we clearly need to come up with a policy that works for the whole of the UK.

Mr David Burrowes (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): I am holding a Brexit forum next month with local businesses in my constituency involving interests ranging from information technology to the creative industries, retail and property. What is the Minister’s advice to those local businesses about engaging with Brexit? Is it to embrace the challenges and opportunities presented, or is it to follow the lead of the Opposition that is full of pessimism and denial?
Mr Walker: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we need to make sure that we embrace the full range of challenges and opportunities in the Brexit process, and we need to engage with business through that process. It is excellent that my hon. Friend is holding a forum and it is good that he is listening to businesses in his constituency. That is certainly something that we as the Department will be doing all around the country.

Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): The Government’s shocking record on tackling air pollution is well documented, with almost 10,000 associated deaths in London in just one year. Given that the Government regularly flout EU regulations on air pollution even now, what assurance can the Minister give me that once we exit the European Union, they will not simply abandon all legal protection on air pollution in the capital and, indeed, in the country more widely?

Mr Walker: The Government are firmly committed to improving the UK’s air quality and cutting harmful emissions. That is why we have committed more than £2 billion since 2011 to increase the uptake of ultra-low emission vehicles, to support greener transport schemes and to set out a national plan to tackle pollution in our towns and cities.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I have visited the Institute of Cancer Research. It wants to develop a London cancer hub, which I hope the Government will support, and, if that development happens, it expects to be able to develop two new cancer drugs in five years. One of its concerns is that 30% of its postgraduates come from the European Union. What guarantees can the Minister give that these essential London workers will be able to continue in post, and indeed that the institute will be able to recruit from the EU in the future?

Mr Walker: I refer the right hon. Gentleman to my earlier answer to the Chair of the Science and Technology Committee. We want to continue to attract the brightest and the best, and we will certainly make sure—I have already had a Brexit dividend. With the pound falling motorists, with the ongoing negotiations on the UK leaving the EU to ensure continued access to the EU single market for goods, people and services.

Single Market

8. Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): If he will take steps during negotiations on the UK leaving the EU to ensure continued access to the EU single market for goods, people and services.

Ms Ritchie: The Secretary of State’s answer suggests that nothing has yet been set in stone. With that in mind and given the importance of membership of the single market to the all-Ireland economy, will the Secretary of State commit to exploring ways in which Northern Ireland can remain in the single market, because of its importance to our business, in the eventuality that Britain leaves?

Mr Davis: What I will commit myself to—I have already committed to this—is extensive work to ensure that we keep an open border between the north and the south, maintain the common travel area, and maintain the most effective open market that we can achieve. Within that, I do not intend to specify any particular outcome at this point.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): The remain campaign was perfectly clear that we have to leave the single market. [HON. MEMBERS: “Do you mean the leave campaign?”] No, I mean the remain campaign. Are not the really important questions whether the French wish to sell us wine without tariffs, whether the Germans wish to sell us cars without tariffs, and whether the whole of Europe wishes to continue its current level of access to the City?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. When the Prime Minister is at the European Council tonight and tomorrow, she will reiterate what we have said many times already: we want an outcome that is successful for both the United Kingdom and the European Union. As my hon. Friend suggests, if the UK and the EU do not achieve an open, free and barrier-free trading relationship, it will be harmful to many European countries and harmful to European financial stability, and no one wants that.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Were we to leave the customs union, the businesses exporting 44% of our exports to the EU would face extra costs for compliance with the rules of origin, which the OECD estimates at 25%. Does the Secretary of State not agree that membership of the customs union is even more important than membership of the single market?

Mr Davis: As I said earlier, these matters are assessed very carefully, but perhaps the hon. Lady should look at various other countries around the European Union, although they are all smaller than us, so they are not really good models. There is Turkey, which is inside the customs union and outside the single market; there is Norway, which is inside the single market and outside the customs union—actually it manages to trade with Sweden very easily—and there is Switzerland, which is outside both the customs union and the single market. What we are looking for is the best balance to achieve the best outcome.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): Obviously the Minister cannot speculate on how the negotiations will go, but the one thing we do know is that we have already had a Brexit dividend. With the pound falling
by 15.2% against the euro, our exports are so much cheaper and our imports are so much more expensive that more jobs will come into this country and more goods will be produced here, which is a very good thing.

Mr Davis: It is not for this Minister, at any rate, to comment on what is the appropriate or right level of the pound. However, as my hon. Friend says, this has its disadvantages in terms of the effect on inflation, but some serious advantages in terms of our trading capability, and those are much bigger even than the tariffs that people talk about.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I would call the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) if she were standing, but she is not, so I will not.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP) rose—

Mr Speaker: Ah! She is. Enlightenment has dawned.

16. [906704] Margaret Ferrier: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Leaving the single market in a hard Brexit will be catastrophic, and the Treasury estimates that the cost to the UK economy could be £66 billion, that 80,000 jobs in Scotland could be lost, and that wages could be hit by up to £2,000 a year. The Tory manifesto clearly stated: “We say: yes to the Single Market”.

Will the Secretary of State cast doubt aside, and undertake to make good on that commitment?

Mr Davis: What I can undertake to do is to ensure that we secure the freest and most open possible trading arrangement with Europe. That is what matters, not titles such as “single market”, “hard Brexit” or “soft Brexit”—all those amazing terms that people come up with. We want the maximum possible access, which will encourage job growth, wealth growth and revenue growth in this country.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): Membership of the single market means accepting EU laws, having to accept rulings from the European Court of Justice, probably still making contributions to the EU budget, and accepting free movement of people, all of which flies in the face of what the British people voted for in the referendum. Is not the only question of principle that is at stake the question of whether the EU wants to continue its free movement of people, all of which flies in the face of what the British people voted for in the referendum?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Let me reiterate what I said earlier. Our aim is to come up with an outcome that is good for the United Kingdom and good for the European Union, and that is a free trade area with us.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): The UK has been a leading player on environmental policy, setting the international agenda on climate change, as demonstrated by the Prime Minister’s commitment to ratify the Paris agreement as soon as possible. As recently announced, Britain will take back control of its laws through the great repeal Bill. Any changes to our environmental regulations after that time will be for the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and this House to decide. The UK will continue to be a leader on international environmental co-operation.

Neil Parish: The European directive on bathing water has actually been part of a very good environmental law—water companies have cleaned up our beaches throughout the country, including the south-west—so can we rest assured that we will not row back on environmental laws that are good? Not all environmental laws from Europe are bad.

Mr Walker: I can see my hon. Friend’s point that it is in the UK’s interest to ensure that we have the cleanest possible bathing water. That issue will be something for future debates perhaps with DEFRA, but we will ensure that we maintain at least the standards that we have maintained in the past. I remind him of our manifesto commitment to be the first generation to leave the environment in a better state than we inherited.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Is the Minister not aware that on environmental issues—waste, water and energy—we have such close relationships throughout Europe and we are very dependent on the high level of its technology and co-operation with us? Many people in that sector have read Matthew Parris’s article describing Brexit as the worst decision this country has made since Suez. Does the Minister agree with that view?

Mr Walker: I do not think now is the time to refight the referendum, on which the hon. Gentleman and I may have been on the same side, but it will be absolutely in our interest to co-operate with our neighbours on matters of the environment that affect us all.

20. [906711] Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): Among those who will be most affected by changes to environmental regulations will be the agriculture community. Is my hon. Friend aware of the significant concern among that community at the prospect of leaving the single market, with issues affecting welfare and the environment as well as tariffs? Can he assure the House that agriculture will not be used as a makeweight in the negotiations with other interests and that there will be close co-operation with DEFRA colleagues in relation to that?

Mr Walker: Absolutely. I can assure my right hon. Friend that there is close co-operation between my Department and DEFRA and indeed there have been a number of productive meetings between Ministers in our Department and agricultural interests, including the National Farmers Union and agri-business representatives from the whole of the UK.

EU Environmental Regulations

9. Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): What plans he has for the UK to retain EU environmental regulations after it leaves the EU. [906696]
Employment and Workers’ Rights

11. Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on employment and workers’ rights deriving from EU legislation and rulings of the European Court of Justice being given domestic effect upon the UK leaving the EU. [906698]

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): A large component of the people who voted to leave the EU could be characterised as the British industrial working class. It is no part of my brief to undermine their rights—full stop. As a Government, we have been clear that we will do nothing to undermine workers’ rights. All law in this area at the time of exit will be brought under UK law as part of the great repeal Bill, ensuring continuity.

Angela Smith: The 2000 part-time workers regulations implemented the EU directive that guarantees that the rights of part-time workers are equal with those of their full-time colleagues. Will the Secretary of State guarantee that those rights will not be removed or diluted in any way when the UK leaves the EU?

Mr Davis: As I said, all law will be incorporated—no exceptions.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): On that point, employment law is a devolved matter in Northern Ireland, so under the great repeal Bill will that competence be automatically devolved, or will it be held in some sort of holding room here before it is devolved?

Mr Davis: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. That is why I said last week when we were talking about the great repeal Bill that we will have extensive discussions with all the devolved Administrations to ensure that each appropriate piece of law goes to the right place.

Scottish Universities

15. Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP): Whether he has met representatives of Scotland’s universities to discuss the implications of the UK leaving the EU. [906703]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): We have engaged with a number of higher education institutions, including groups such as Universities UK. Over the next few months, the Department will continue to engage with key stakeholders in business and civil society, including universities, through a series of round tables, bilaterals and visits throughout the UK. We have been clear we want to create an environment in which the UK as a whole can continue to be a world leader in research, science and tertiary education.

Tommy Sheppard: There are 4,512 students at the University of Edinburgh from other EU countries and several thousand other EU nationals engaged in research, teaching and administration at the university. I ask Ministers again: do they not realise that the refusal to guarantee the status of those people in our community is placing in jeopardy much of the work of that great institution and is causing unnecessary anxiety in our community?

Mr Walker: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answers I gave earlier on the Government’s full intention to secure the rights of EU citizens in the UK and UK citizens in the EU. The Government recently announced that EU students applying for a place at an English university or further education institution in 2017-18 will continue to be eligible for student loans and grants for the duration of their course, and I believe the Scottish Government have made the same guarantee.

Article 50

17. David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): What the timetable is for the UK triggering article 50. [906705]

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): The Prime Minister has made it clear that she will trigger article 50 by the end of March 2017. It is in everyone’s interests that we take time to establish a UK approach and clear objectives for negotiations. Equally the Prime Minister has been clear that there will be no unnecessary delay. We have also been clear that we will trigger when the time is right for Britain and we will certainly, where possible, give people and businesses in Britain and other European countries the time to consider for themselves what the outcome will amount to. That is what we are doing.

David T. C. Davies: Does my right hon. Friend agree that this Government are absolutely right to deliver the Brexit that 17.2 million people voted for, and to do it in a responsible fashion that allows it to deliver the great deal for Britain that we know it is going to deliver?

Mr Davis: That is exactly right: it is what the Prime Minister said and it is what we intend—and I have to say that I doubt it is what the Opposition intend.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend aware that in the last 24 hours the House of Lords has reported that there should be a vote in this House “to debate and approve the negotiating guidelines, at least in outline”? Does he accept that Parliament as a whole, including the House of Lords, has to not only respect, but also accept, the verdict of the British people and furthermore that it is for this elected House to determine its own procedures, standing orders and votes?

Mr Davis: My hon. Friend is right: we should respect the will of the British people. I have not had a chance to look at the Lords report yet, but I will comment on it when I do.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): As my right hon. Friend will know, a very important court case has been heard in the High Court in the last week. What plans has he drawn up, including legislation, in the event that he loses that case and that therefore it will be this place, including the House of Lords, that will trigger article 50, not the Government using the royal prerogative?

Mr Davis: Let me say gently to my hon. Friend that Ministers do not comment on court cases in progress.
Topical Questions

T2.  [906678] James Berry (Kingston and Surbiton) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Davis): Last week I updated the House on our progress towards leaving the EU. I have been clear that the Government's overarching aims are bringing back control of our laws to Parliament, bringing back control of decisions over immigration to the UK, maintaining the strong security co-operation we have with the EU, and establishing the freest possible market in goods and services with the EU and the rest of the world.

The great repeal Bill will end the primacy of EU law. It will minimise uncertainty and return sovereignty to the institutions of the United Kingdom, because that is what the referendum was all about—taking control.

We will work to ensure the UK's exit from the EU serves the interests of the whole country, from citizens to businesses. We will reap the opportunities exit provides all over the world and deliver an orderly and smooth transition, but I have been clear, as has the Prime Minister, that we will not be providing a running commentary on the negotiations; that would not be in our interests. Parliament will however be fully and properly engaged, as will the devolved Administrations.

We want to build a national consensus around our position and discuss our options with a range of stakeholders. Last week, I committed to a series of debates so that the House can air its views and we look forward to engaging with the new Select Committee. I congratulate again the right hon. Member for Leeds Central (Hilary Benn) on his election as Chair of that Committee.

James Berry: From the Mill bakery next door to my constituency office to the wards of Kingston hospital, thousands of EU citizens work and live in Kingston, and they are very welcome. What process does my right hon. Friend have in mind for ensuring their rights are protected post-Brexit, as well as the rights of British ex-pats living in the EU, something that none of the 27 Heads of State is yet to guarantee?

Mr Davis: As the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) has made clear already, we want to be able to guarantee the rights of all those European migrants in the UK. Many of them are already in the position of having indefinite leave to remain, or will have by the time we leave in two and a half years' time or thereabouts, so we are talking about a small fraction of those people, but nevertheless we take this incredibly seriously and we will seek to get the agreement with the other European countries that we will uphold their rights and British citizens' rights abroad as soon as possible.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): I don't know about you, Mr Speaker, but the British people have had enough of being misled over these issues. Will the Secretary of State tell the House and the country whether his plan—as it evolves—will involve this country agreeing to continue to make payments to the European Union after we have left it?

Mr Davis: The hon. Lady had a great deal of trouble keeping a straight face while she was asking that question. That is because she knows it is one that I am not going to answer.

Jenny Chapman: I look forward to being able to ask the Secretary of State a question with a straight face in anticipation of getting a straight answer. Could he perhaps try to tell the House and the country how much he estimates will need to be spent on settling legacy commitments prior to the completion of Brexit? The Financial Times estimates—this is not a leak; it is an analysis—that our historical liabilities could cost up to £20 billion.

Mr Davis: I have no trouble keeping a straight face when dealing with the Opposition. I am afraid that, from time to time, they do things that are seriously not in the country's interests. Let me quote a rather more authoritative source than the Financial Times. The European Commission has guidelines on how it handles negotiations and what it puts in the public domain beforehand. It states: "The negotiations and their texts are not themselves public. This is entirely normal for trade negotiations, not just those involving the EU. There are several reasons for this. A certain level of confidentiality is necessary to protect EU interests and to keep chances for a satisfactory outcome high. When entering into a game, no-one starts by revealing his entire strategy to his counterpart from the outset: this is also the case for the EU." The Opposition are trying to put us in a disadvantaged position with the European Union, and that is not in the national interest.

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T3.  [906679] Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Are opportunities being identified for British business that will arise from our departure?

The Minister of State, Department for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Jones): My right hon. Friend raises an important point. Many hon. Members are seeking to identify the challenges associated with exiting the European Union, but there will also be a great number of opportunities, not least because we will be in charge of our own affairs and our own trade policy. For that reason, my Department and the Department for International Trade are engaging regularly with businesses not only in the United Kingdom but around the globe.

T4.  [906680] Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Kilburn) (Lab): In Camden, where I live, the Back to Business and FastForward programmes benefit enormously from the European social fund. Those programmes create a more inclusive labour market employing 400 people in my constituency, many of whom are disabled. Will the Minister outline what plans he has to protect the funding for such programmes, which promote social inclusivity?

Mr David Davis: Most EU funds will be guaranteed post-departure by the Treasury, as we said in August. After that, the decision will be one for the British people, the British Parliament, the British Government and the relevant Department. I am sure that they will take on board what the hon. Lady has said.
T5. [906683] Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): Does the Secretary of State agree that the UK will continue to be a leading global finance centre outside the EU?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): Absolutely. We do not think that there is any doubt about that. London has once again been ranked as the No. 1 global finance centre in 2016. The next highest ranking EU location was not even in the top 10. Being part of the EU market is partly responsible for our ranking, and we are looking to maintain the best possible terms of trade with the EU market, but that is not the only factor. London clearly leads the world with the depth and expertise of its labour force, the breadth of its knowledge, services and infrastructure and its wide array of links to markets around the world. It is in the interests of the UK and the EU that that should continue.

Mr Walker: The hon. Lady makes an important point. As I said earlier, we want the UK to remain a scientific superpower. We have already seen significant guarantees from the Treasury in the lead-up to 2020. It will be in the interests of future UK Governments to ensure that we remain one of the world’s scientific leaders.

T6. [906684] Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): My right hon. Friend may be aware that according to Cornwall Council’s own figures, only 1,300 jobs will be created from a £350 million EU spend between now and 2020. Does he agree that a much more tailored approach to regional funding could create more jobs more quickly for Cornwall?

Mr David Jones: My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. As I indicated previously, the Chancellor has effectively guaranteed structural funding to 2020. It is important that such programmes deliver value for money and to that end the Government will liaise closely with the devolved Administrations and local authorities such as Cornwall Council.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): Given the Secretary of State’s answer to Question 1 on financial services, I am sure he is well aware that Merrill Lynch has 1,000 staff in Chester and that Santander has more than 1,000 staff in Bootle. However, he has staff only in London and Brussels. Will he therefore commit to base staff from his Department in every region of England so that businesses can share their views directly with them?

Mr David Davis: This is not about the allocation of staff. If I put one staff member in every region, only one will be left in Whitehall. The simple truth is that we have been around from Belfast to Blackburn to the port of Tilbury and many other places in the UK and will continue to do so throughout the process, both up until the point at which we trigger article 50 and thereafter.

T7. [906685] Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): I did not quite catch the Minister’s response earlier, so will he tell us again what priority he is giving to ensuring that universities and research funding more broadly will not be adversely affected by Brexit, and that current research protocols will be protected?

Mr Davis: As I have said several times in debates that the hon. Gentleman has attended, I will make as much information public as possible without prejudicing our negotiating position. That is what he is witnessing.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Stafford looks very happy. Presumably, like me, he is celebrating Arsenal’s 6-0 victory last night.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I am, Sir. Will the Secretary of State reassure the NHS that it will be able to continue to employ those EU nationals after Brexit?

Mr Davis: I will indeed. We have been studying in some detail the effect on integrated manufacturing operations across borders to ensure that they are not jeopardised, whatever the outcome.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): In a written answer to me yesterday, the Secretary of State for Wales talked about the full engagement of the devolved Administrations in Brexit negotiations. The best way to protect Wales’s interests would be to put the First Minister in the Government’s negotiating team. What good reason is there not to do so?

Mr Davis: I met the First Minister and the Finance Minister on Tuesday to talk about Wales’s interests. That is how we will do it.

Mark Pawsley (Rugby) (Con): Companies in the supply chain to the motor industry, such as Automotive Insulations in my constituency, have benefited from multinational investment in the sector in recent years. What recent discussions have taken place to reassure the sector that the UK is a great place in which to invest?
Mr Davis: The Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr Walker) was with sector representatives just a day or two ago and Nissan went to see the Prime Minister just this week.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): People in Scotland are scared about being left on a relatively small island without the protection of the EU and with perpetual Tory Governments in charge of employment law. Will this Government commit to fully devolving employment law so that we can better protect our workers?

Mr Davis: I have to say that it was this Minister who gave the commitment that we would not undermine or in any way reduce the protection available to British workers’ employment rights in all the nations of the United Kingdom. Tomorrow, I am meeting Mike Russell, the Scottish National party’s representative, in Glasgow to discuss this sort of thing.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Will Ministers reassure farmers in my constituency that in reviewing agricultural and environmental regulations they will have at the forefront of their minds the need for our farmers to produce the high-quality food that they do in a profitable way, just as any other business does?

Mr David Jones: My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point, and of course one benefit of leaving the European Union is that not only will we be able to adhere to stringent environmental requirements, but we will be able to design those so as best to suit the needs of this country and the agricultural industry.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): Both Nissan and Jaguar Land Rover have made it clear that access to the single market is crucial to their future investment decisions in this country. What discussions has the Minister had with those companies to give them reassurance that access to the single market is the Government’s highest priority?

Mr David Davis: More important than me, the Prime Minister had a meeting with Nissan only this week, and the communiqué that came out after it was extremely positive on both sides.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): Brexit has been widely welcomed by leaders of the fishing industry in the Grimsby-Cleethorpes area. The industry was badly let down in the original negotiations in the 1970s. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that that will not be the case on this occasion?

Mr David Jones: My hon. Friend makes an extremely important point. The interests of the British fishing industry are at the forefront of the Government’s mind. Indeed, we have already had meetings with the Scottish fishermen and had round-table meetings at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Finally and extremely briefly, Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In Northern Ireland, my constituency has some of the best export businesses in agri-food and fishing, and they need attention. Minister, may I invite you to my constituency to hear what they have to say?

Mr Jones: I would be delighted to visit, as I would be to go to other parts of the country that have an important fishing industry.
Business of the House

10.36 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr David Lidington): The business for next week will be as follows:

Monday 24 October—Second Reading of the Health Services Medical Supplies (Costs) Bill.
Tuesday 25 October—Second Reading of the Criminal Finances Bill.
Wednesday 26 October—Opposition day (10th allotted day). There will be a debate on Concentrix, followed by a debate on Yemen. Both debates will arise on an Opposition motion.
Thursday 27 October—A motion to approve the first report 2016-17 from the Committee of Privileges, followed by a debate on a motion on the Youth Parliament Select Committee report on young people’s mental health. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.
Friday 28 October—Private Members’ Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 31 October will include:

Monday 31 October—Second Reading of the Cultural Property (Armed Conflicts) / Lords / Bill.
Tuesday 1 November—Consideration of Lords amendments.
Wednesday 2 November—Opposition day (11th allotted day). There will be a debate on an Opposition motion. Subject to be announced.
Thursday 3 November—Business to be nominated by the Backbench Business Committee.
Friday 4 November—Private Members’ Bills.

I should also like to inform the House that the business in Westminster Hall for 17 and 24 November will be as follows:

Thursday 17 November—A debate on the first report from the Environmental Audit Committee on soil health.
Thursday 24 November—A debate on the first report from the International Development Committee on UK implementation of the sustainable development goals.

Valerie Vaz: When I was first appointed to this job, I was told, “There’s no power.” I am therefore pleased that after I raised the issue of Marmite last week, we got a result by the end of the day. Bob Dylan has been awarded the Nobel prize for literature but has not contacted the academy, so we say to Bob, “Please contact the academy.” I thank the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart) for his kind comments last week. As a composer, perhaps he can spot the subliminal messages to Bob.

We are governed by a Government of urgent questions and, if we are lucky, statements. Now we are to have a statement on the crisis in the funding of pharmacies. However, it took an urgent question by my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Michael Dugher), which you granted, Mr Speaker, to get the Minister to come to the House today. May I ask the Leader of the House, why a statement and not a debate? The Minister responsible has said that the Government have proposed a way to reduce the £2.8 billion currently paid to the sector, but that the Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee has rejected it. In February, the Health Secretary said that “pharmacists have a very important part in the future of the NHS”—[Official Report, 11 February 2016; Vol. 605, c. 1775.]

So why the cuts?

On 25 April, the Health Secretary commended the important role “that pharmacies can play in solving absolutely any problem that the NHS faces.”—[Official Report, 25 April 2016; Vol. 608, c. 1170.]
And in July this year, he said that “this is the right moment to rethink the role of pharmacies, and consider whether we can be better at tapping into the incredible skills that pharmacists have as trained clinicians, which I do not think we make the most of.”—[Official Report, 5 July 2016; Vol. 612, c. 733.]

So why the cuts? The Health Secretary is a jokerman. If it’s all good, why is he cutting the budget for the sector, much of which is made up of small businesses on which many communities rely as a lifetime?

For the second time this week, we have government by urgent question. Only last week I mentioned the reversal of the economic policy of the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), and here comes another reversal. May we have a full debate, not just a statement or an urgent question, on the sale of annuities? Dragged to the House on a U-turn so spectacular that we cannot see around the bend, the poor Minister responsible said that after extensive research, it was clear that a secondary market would not be able to offer this scheme. There were many unanswered questions. For instance, when did the Government first do the extensive research? Did the former Chancellor not look at the evidence in March 2015, or was this just a means of stimulating the economy using people’s hard-earned savings while pursuing austerity measures? The answer, Mr Speaker, is blowin’ in the wind.

Will the Leader of the House make a statement to explain what the Secretary of State for International Development meant when she said that the Government cannot reveal their hand on negotiations to exit the EU because one does not do so when one plays poker? Poker, Mr Speaker? Are the Government gambling with the lives of the British people? Even Margaret Thatcher had a negotiating position. It was “No, no, no”, or “I want a rebate”. The Government say that they cannot reveal a negotiating position; we say that that is basic accountability. The only answer from the Government is that a hard Brexit’s a-gonna fall.

The debate or statement on airport expansion in the south-east, which was scheduled for next week, has now been postponed yet again. The Prime Minister made her intentions clear, but only in a response to the hon. Member for Bedford (Richard Fuller) at Prime Minister’s questions. She said that “this Government will take a decision, but then a formal process has to be undertaken. The Government will identify their preferred site option. ‘That will go to a statutory consultation, and then the Government will consider the results of that consultation.”—[Official Report, 20 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 802.]

I think that is Davies part 2. What of the timetable for implementation—the second part of the question that was not answered—and the further work on noise pollution, environmental issues and compensation from Davies...
part? Will those take place? Members of the Cabinet are on different sides of the debate—they are all tangled up in blue.

I want to place on record my thanks to the former Prime Minister and his wife Samantha for their unstinting support for epilepsy charities, much of which goes unnoticed.

Tomorrow, we remember the 50th anniversary of the Aberfan disaster in which 114 children and 28 adults lost their lives. I hope that wherever a flag is flown in our one nation tomorrow, it will be at half-mast.

Our colleague, friend and supporter of the vulnerable, Jo Cox, gave service to her country through her public service, and so rightly deserves a plaque in this Chamber.

Jean, Gordon and Kim Leadbetter and Brendan Cox should not have had to bury their daughter, sister and wife, and her adored children should not have had to grow up without their mother. Our love to them all. May she rest in peace.

Mr Lidington: May I first deal with the two very serious points that the hon. Lady raised at the end of her remarks? I am sure that every single Member of the House will want to mark the appalling tragedy in Aberfan when the anniversary is commemorated tomorrow. None of us can ever forget—even if we were fairly young children at the time—the searing impact of the photographs and news coverage of what happened there. The images and the visible grief of the families are still clear in the memory. So too, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said yesterday, is the fact that those who might have been able to prevent the tragedy in the first place did not act in fulfilment of their responsibilities and did not, until forced to do so, own up to their responsibilities until we had an independent inquiry some years later.

Solidarity with Aberfan will unite the House, as will sympathy with the family of our late colleague, Jo Cox. I know that the matter of the commemorative shield is very high on your agenda, Mr Speaker. I pay tribute to the Parliament choir, which exists as an all-party parliamentary group and, with the agreement of Jo’s family, has commissioned a new choral composition that will be performed in her memory at a forthcoming concert.

On the political points, I was not sure whether the hon. Lady was complaining about there having been too many urgent questions. I felt that there was a certain retrospective character to her comments. On pharmacies, as she knows, there will be a statement by the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (David Mowat), after business questions this morning, in which he will set out in detail the Government’s approach to community pharmacies. It is very important that we ensure not just that the money going to the national health service is sustained and increased, as the Government are doing, but that every last penny that goes to the NHS is spent to give patients the best possible value. We need to look at community pharmacy within primary, secondary and tertiary health care to ensure that we get the best possible value out of every penny of precious NHS funding that is spent.

On the hon. Lady’s point about the sale of annuities, as my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to the Treasury said yesterday, the Government made a thorough and honest assessment of the prospects for a genuine market in secondary annuities, and we reluctantly came to the conclusion that to have gone ahead with the measures originally envisaged would not have been of benefit to the very group of consumers who were looking to a secondary annuities market to provide them with some relief, because the products were simply not going to be available to give them the additional safeguards and opportunities that they were seeking.

I struggle to understand the Opposition’s position on the negotiating position that the Government are adopting for the forthcoming European Union negotiations. I would have thought that whether we are talking about politics, business or any other walk of life, if we are about to start a very important and wide-ranging negotiation, the last thing that we should do is advertise the detail of our negotiating position so that the people with whom we are negotiating can see everything spread out in front of them. The Opposition need to wake up and realise that the people who would be most delighted if they got their way are the people with whom we will be negotiating across the table.

Finally, on the hon. Lady’s point about airports, as the Prime Minister said, the Government will make an announcement in the near future about which of the options proposed in the Davies report we will adopt. The Davies report said that any of the three options that it proposed would be deliverable and sustainable. The Government will, of course, comply with the requirement of statutory consultation following that announcement, which the Labour Government put in place. That helps to account for the delay about which she is now complaining.

I have to say that if there is one thing that is blowin’ in the wind this morning, it is the coherence of the Labour party’s ideas about policy. I do not know whether other Labour Members are sleeping well at night, but it is very clear to me that there is no place they’re going to.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. As usual, a very large number of hon. and right hon. Members are seeking to catch my eye. As colleagues will know, my normal practice is to call everybody on these occasions, but there are exceptions. Today, there is a statement on community pharmacy to follow, and there are two very heavily subscribed debates to take place under the auspices of the Backbench Business Committee. Therefore, it may not be possible to call everyone today, but if I am to have any chance of doing so, there is a premium upon brevity, which will be brilliantly exemplified by Mr Philip Davies.

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): May we have a statement urgently from the Government about the farce of allowing the child refugees into the country? The Home Office has admitted that two thirds of successful applicants as child refugees are actually adults. Today, Jack Straw has said that we need to do better on age checks, as the right hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Liam Byrne), did when he was the Immigration Minister. That is a serious concern to many of our constituents. May we
have an urgent statement on what the Government are going to do to ensure that the child refugees are actually children?

**Mr Lidington:** We do work closely with the French authorities to ensure that all those applying to the UK do actually qualify under the Dublin arrangements, which include the requirement for children to be under 18. We have to carry out the checks in a way that complies with High Court judgments on the matter. As my hon. Friend knows, the British Dental Association has taken the view that to carry out X-rays of claimants’ teeth would not be a reliable indicator of age, as well as being, in its view, unethical.

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): May I also thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business for next week? I join him and the shadow Leader of the House in the tributes to Aberfan. Today is a very special day, with the by-election in Batley and Spen, and we recall all the horrific events around the murder of Jo Cox.

Today, we find that the Prime Minister is off to Brussels for her first trip with EU leaders since she became Prime Minister. She is advocating something I think she describes as a “smooth Brexit”. May I suggest that, in our debates, we get our terms absolutely right for Brexit? We have hard Brexit and soft Brexit. I want to suggest crispy Brexit, soggy Brexit and maybe “I can’t believe it’s not Brexit.”

The serious point is that we still have not had a debate in Government time on their plans to leave the European Union. We have had one in SNP time and one in Labour party time. We heard the Lords EU Committee say yesterday that the issue must be properly debated and scrutinised, and even suggest that we have a debate in advance of article 50 being triggered. So can we now—I am going to ask the Leader of the House this every week—have solid plans and proposals for when this House will get to debate what the Government intend to do?

The redrawn boundaries for Scottish Members of Parliament were produced this morning, and they would reduce the number of MPs from Scotland from 59 to 53. SNP Members would like to reduce that number to zero when we gain our independence and sovereignty, but in the meantime, while we are still here, I would like the opinion of the Leader of the House on one issue—I saw that he was in the debate briefly yesterday. How can it possibly be right that, in these Houses of Parliament, we now have more parliamentarians appointed by a Prime Minister than elected by the people? He is making that worse.

Finally, tomorrow we have the private Member’s Bill tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson) on a very important issue. The “Turing Bill” seeks to posthumously pardon thousands of gay men who were caught up in all the anti-homosexual legislation. However, we have heard that the Government are withdrawing support for it, in favour of an amendment in the House of Lords. It should be here in the Commons that the issue is properly considered, by elected Members. All that the Government’s action will do is lead to the withdrawal of support and further undermine the credibility of private Members’ Bills. Will the Leader of the House rethink that decision and make sure that the Government support the private Member’s Bill tomorrow?

**Mr Lidington:** There have already been many opportunities to hold Ministers to account for the Government’s approach to the European negotiations. We have just had questions to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, who has also made a number of oral statements to the House about that since the referendum. I am slightly surprised that the hon. Gentleman should appear to denigrate the importance of Select Committees in this House and the other place. It is simply wrong to believe that only a debate in plenary session qualifies as scrutiny. In my experience, having served as a Minister for more than six years, Select Committees can often be much more demanding on Ministers in terms of preparation and thinking through one’s policy. We should respect the importance of those Committee hearings. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will give an oral statement next week about the European Council, and that will provide yet another opportunity for such questioning.

On the hon. Gentleman’s point about his hon. Friend’s Bill, the Government very much share his wish to see pardons given to people who were convicted of consensual homosexual acts when those were criminal offences. The Government are proposing that we should legislate both to provide posthumous pardons for people who are now deceased and to make it clear that those who are still living can apply under a statutory deregistration scheme for their conviction to be deleted from the record, so that they would then qualify for a pardon. The reason we cannot support his hon. Friend’s Bill is that it does not take account of the need, in respect of people who are now living, to check that the offence of which they were convicted was genuinely consensual and did not involve, for example, a sexual offence against a minor, which would still be a breach of the criminal law today.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

**Mr Speaker:** What is now required, in each case, is a short question without preamble and a characteristically pithy reply from the Front Bench.

**Amanda Milling** (Cannock Chase) (Con): Last week, Briggs Equipment celebrated its 10th anniversary. To mark this occasion, it held an event where I got to meet 14 new apprentices. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Briggs on its anniversary and wish the new apprentices the best of luck with their new careers; and may we have a statement on the Government’s 3 million apprenticeship target?

**Mr Lidington:** I am delighted to hear the news from my hon. Friend’s constituency. The Government regard their 3 million apprenticeship target as a key element in increasing the skills and productivity of our nation. As the evidence from her constituency shows, sensible businesses realise that developing apprenticeship schemes is in their own commercial interest as well.

**Seema Malhotra** (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Last year, the UK received £5.6 billion from the European Investment Bank for investing in skills, housing, schools
and infrastructure across the country. With the UK currently languishing at the bottom of the G7 productivity league table, may we have an urgent debate on the impact of leaving the European Union and potentially losing our stake in the European Investment Bank on the UK’s productivity, and the Government’s plans to address this?

Mr Lidington: All these things will of course be elements in the negotiations. The Government have made it very clear that their industrial strategy is intended to address the very deep-seated, long-running productivity problem that we have.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Will my right hon. Friend find time for a debate on returning veterans with mental health issues? I recently met veterans with mental health issues? I recently met representatives from Care after Combat, which has a very good success rate in turning round the lives of people who unfortunately end up in prison.

Mr Lidington: The Government want to do all within our power to make sure that those who have served, and currently serve, in the armed forces have the best possible access to treatment for mental health problems, and that appropriate action is taken to prevent people from developing them in the first place. I can assure my hon. Friend of the commitment of Defence Ministers and Health Ministers to what he advocates.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for confirming the time allocation for the Backbench Business Committee on 3 November. Is there any element of protection for the time allocated on 27 October to the debate on the Youth Parliament’s report on young people’s mental health? May I also ask for an indication of any time allocations for Monday 7 November and Tuesday 8 November? I am surprised, by the way, that the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Peter Wishart) forgot to mention ready Brexit, but not to worry.

Mr Lidington: The time next week will be protected. I shall write to the hon. Gentleman about the other dates.

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I remember the days when Labour Members used to complain about how much time we spent on Europe. Really, Minister, is it not about time that we stopped banging on about Europe and just got on with it?

Mr Lidington: I note my hon. Friend’s advice that we should stop banging on about the subject. If that is a belated addition to his birthday wish list, I would be happy to oblige. As a Government, we need to prepare our negotiating position thoroughly and then get the best and most ambitious deal possible on behalf of all the people of the United Kingdom.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): The Letters Page, a literary journal that invites submissions in the form of hand-written letters, is edited by the author Jon McGregor and creative writing students at the University of Nottingham. It is usually published three times a year as a downloadable PDF file, but the eighth edition is due to appear on 2 November in print as a limited edition boxset. Ahead of next Tuesday’s Nottingham in Parliament Day, will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating The Letters Page on that momentous event, and does it not further confirm Nottingham’s status as a UNESCO city of literature?

Mr Lidington: I am delighted to hear about the literary creativity of the hon. Lady’s constituents and of the people of Nottingham. It is good to hear that the great literary tradition of D.H. Lawrence has not been extinguished but is alive and flourishing today.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): Sepsis currently claims about 44,000 lives in the UK every year. May we have a statement on the Government’s newly announced public awareness campaign, so that we can establish how Public Health England plans to work with experts such as the UK Sepsis Trust to make sure that the campaign is as successful as possible?

Mr Lidington: Everyone in this House will want to take note of recent shocking cases where people have not had sepsis diagnosed early enough for effective treatment to be given. It is, clearly, deeply unsatisfactory that there should be any such case. Health Ministers will certainly want to ensure that there are improvements where they can be achieved, and I will draw their attention to my right hon. Friend’s request for a debate.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): May we have a debate on palliative care? Kilbryde hospice in my constituency was recently opened by the First Minister of Scotland. It is a crucial resource for those most in need at the end of their lives, and such facilities should be supported right across the United Kingdom.

Mr Lidington: I, like the hon. Lady, demonstrate support when I can for the palliative care services in my constituency. One of the important improvements in attitudes towards healthcare in recent years is the acceptance that people who are in the final stages of their lives are entitled to be treated not just for their physical symptoms, but with the respect and dignity that is due to the whole person.

Mr Stewart Jackson (Peterborough) (Con): Last week, I hosted a meeting of my constituents in St Michael’s Gate in Peterborough, many of whom will be evicted shortly as a result of a deal between Peterborough City Council and the north London estate agent, Stef & Philips. They will be replaced by homeless people from the council’s homeless list, so may we have a debate on housing benefit regulations and the dubious and morally repugnant business model that prioritises housing benefit income for these people, rather than the interests of my long-standing constituents?

Mr Lidington: I am concerned to hear about what is happening in Peterborough. If my hon. Friend would care to provide me with the details, I will draw them to the attention of the responsible Minister straightaway.

Paul Flynn (Newport West) (Lab): The total number of deaths caused in America by the side effects of opioid drugs has now grown to a larger figure than the
than the maladies?

Mr Lidington: The hon. Gentleman has looked at drug use and drugs policy for many years, so I listen with some respect to what he says. There will be the opportunity to question Home Office Ministers about this on 31 October, and I suggest that he take advantage of that opportunity.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): May we have time in this Chamber to debate the rural economy? There is never enough time in Back-Bench debates or in Westminster Hall to discuss the rural economy, which will be vital to the United Kingdom when we leave the European Union. May we therefore have time to do so in this Chamber?

Mr Lidington: Although there will be opportunities to question my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and her Ministers, my advice in the short term, given the number of hon. Members from all parts of the House who represent rural or partly rural constituencies, is to make an application to the Backbench Business Committee, because there should be strength in numbers.

Alex Salmond (Gordon) (SNP): May we have a debate on the international freedom of the press, just in case the BBC faces the closure of its Moscow bureau bank accounts by a state-owned bank in Russia—something that happens in authoritarian states but would never, ever happen in a liberal democracy such as the United Kingdom?

Mr Lidington: We all want to keep a close eye on action that the Russian authorities may take towards free media and, for that matter, civil society organisations inside their own territory. There is a history of the Russian authorities causing difficulties for journalists, broadcasters, civil society organisations and the British Council. That is something to be deplored at every opportunity.

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): Following my debate in Westminster Hall yesterday on the Ministry of Defence future accommodation model, I have been inundated with concerned messages from military families overnight. Will the Leader of the House therefore support my request for a wider debate in the House on the future and security of military housing provision for our armed forces families, as part of our commitment to the armed forces covenant?

Mr Lidington: My hon. Friend spoke, as she always does, with great vigour and on the basis of significant knowledge in the debate yesterday. She will have had an answer at the end of the debate from the Under-Secretary of State for Defence, my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes North (Mark Lancaster), who has responsibility for veterans. The Government will publish its proposals for defence estates later this year, and that, I am sure, will provide Members with further opportunities to debate this subject.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): The Swansea bay tidal lagoon project would pave the way for £15 billion of investment in tidal lagoons, including one planned for the Solway firth in my constituency that could provide electricity for 1 million homes. We need tidal power as part of our future clean energy. When the Government’s review of tidal lagoon technology reports next month, may we have a ministerial statement in support of that technology?

Mr Lidington: As the hon. Lady says, the results of that review are due to be reported in the next few weeks. I will make sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy is aware of her request for a statement on the matter. I am sure that there will be opportunities in the House to debate these matters and for her to raise her concerns.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): May we have a debate on the process used to review the green belt? In Greater Manchester, the call for developers to submit expressions of interest in building on the green belt has resulted in vast swathes of green-belt land becoming the subject of speculation. That is causing great distress and anxiety for thousands of residents.

Mr Lidington: The Government’s national planning policy framework makes it clear that green-belt land should be used for development only in the most exceptional circumstances. If a local authority wants to make such a case for exceptionalism, it has to provide the justification for that when it submits its draft local plan for examination in public, at which point an independent inspector tests rigorously the arguments that the local authority has made. These matters are, rightly, dealt with at arm’s length from central Government Ministers, but that is the procedure that my hon. Friend and his constituents might want to look at.

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate or possibly a ministerial correction on the subject of how difficult, or otherwise, it is for EU countries to export to Norway? In an earlier exchange, the Brexit Secretary said that it was very easy for Sweden to export to Norway. However, I am indebted to L. Alan Winters, professor of economics, who has said that one of the messages from a conference held in Sweden earlier this week was that “Swedish exporters find exporting to Norway far more troublesome than exporting within the EU.”

Mr Lidington: The right hon. Gentleman will have other opportunities to challenge my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union. I must say that I may be responsible for many things, but commercial relations between Sweden and Norway are not one of them.

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): Will the Leader of the House, in his unique role, review the Government’s approach to their responses to Select Committee reports and speed them up? The Women and Equalities Committee
has been waiting since May for a response to its gender pay gap report, and before that we waited four months for a response to our important report on transgender people.

**Mr Lidington:** I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving me notice of her question. I have looked into this matter. The report she mentions involves the responsibilities of a number of Departments, and I think that she received a letter from the Minister for Women and Equalities to alert her to the fact that there would probably be a delay in making a response. However, I share my right hon. Friend’s disquiet, and I certainly do not regard it as defensible that her Committee should have had to wait so much longer than the normal period. I will draw her concern to the attention of the Ministers responsible, and I hope that we will be able to provide her Committee with a Government response to which it is entitled as rapidly as possible.

**Mr Barry Sheerman**  (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Fifty years ago, I was a newly appointed young lecturer at Swansea University, and I remember the deeply dark and wet day of Aberfan and the deaths of all those children. May I associate myself with the comments that have been made about keeping them in our thoughts? We should have a discussion in the House about how we look after the people involved—the families, the supporters and the communities—when such tragedies happen. It took a long time to respond positively to that terrible tragedy.

**Mr Lidington:** The hon. Gentleman makes a very fair and reasonable point. As he rightly says, it is often some time after the immediate period of shock and grief that the full traumatic impact of what people have lived through and what they have lost bears down on them. An effective response has to involve not just statutory services but—this is often most effective—friends and neighbours in the communities where the people themselves live. I suspect there are lessons that can be learned from successes and failures in responding to various tragedies that have taken place over the years. I hope that he has the opportunity, possibly through the Backbench Business Committee, to raise that matter in the future.

**Pauline Latham**  (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): May we have a debate, in this Chamber in Government time, on endangered species? Please will the Leader of the House not suggest Westminster Hall? I have tried applying for a debate there on rhino poaching for many weeks, and I have not been successful. This is a very important subject for the future of the world. I want my grandchildren and their generation to be able to see animals that are endangered.

**Mr Lidington:** I agree with my hon. Friend. With Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and Foreign Office Ministers in the lead, the Government are taking on the role of being one of the foremost international champions of better arrangements to protect not just endangered species but, crucially, the habitats necessary for their survival. As she knows, effective agreements require international consensus to work. That is what we are seeking through CITES—the convention on international trade in endangered species—and the international organisations that have a role in this area.

**Tom Blenkinsop** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Ten of my constituents are caught up in the Concentrix debacle with the tax credit office. In the past 24 hours, the tax credit office has called me about four cases, saying that it is shutting down the complaints on those cases prior to mandatory reconsideration being complete. May we have a debate about the tax credit office complaints procedure, because such an action breaches that procedure?

**Mr Lidington:** As I have said, there will be a debate on Concentrix in Opposition time next week. On the constituency case, if the hon. Gentleman wants to get the details to me later today, I will send them straight to the Financial Secretary.

**Stephen Hammond**  (Wimbledon) (Con): The UK financial services sector employs 2 million people and is our largest exporter and our largest generator of tax revenue. Will the Leader of the House find time for a debate in this Chamber on the industry’s importance to the UK economy and, indeed, to the Government’s framework for transitional arrangements, so that we can thrive post-Brexit?

**Mr Lidington:** This may be something my hon. Friend is able to raise in the forthcoming debate on industrial strategy, but I am happy to join him in recognising the importance of the sector to the UK economy. I am sure that there will be opportunities, whether under business arising through the Department for Exiting the European Union or through the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, to reinforce the importance of the message he has given the House.

**Chris Stephens**  (Glasgow South West) (SNP): May we have a debate in Government time on the Government’s response to the public consultation on reforms to the civil service compensation scheme? With more than 10,000 responses and 98% against the reforms, may I impress on the Leader of the House the concerns that many Members have on behalf of constituents who have delivered public services throughout the whole of their working lives?

**Mr Lidington:** I want to put on the record the Government’s admiration for the way in which public servants of all grades and in all parts of our public services go about their duty. We have to recognise that, but we also have to recognise that pension schemes, like every other aspect of public expenditure, have to be paid for by taxpayers out of money taken by Government from their earnings. As the hon. Gentleman says, a consultation has been going on; Ministers will consider that consultation and respond in due course.

**Mr David Burrowes**  (Enfield, Southgate) (Con): May we have a debate about services for vulnerable women, which I learned yesterday are being cut because they are not gender neutral? Women’s charities made the point to me that the biggest risk factor for domestic violence is being a woman—domestic violence is not gender neutral. Will the Leader of the House and the Government
acknowledge that this is an issue not of access to trousers or toilets but of vulnerable women’s access to services, which must not be sacrificed on the altar of gender neutrality?

Mr Lidington: If my hon. Friend will let me have some of the details upon which he has based his question, I will draw them to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education, who has responsibility for the Government Equalities Office.

Mr Speaker: Order. What is needed now are questions in single short sentences. If those are forthcoming they will be heard; if not, they will not be.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): I associate myself with the remarks made about Aberfan and about my late friend and colleague Jo Cox.

On Saturday I will be attending the Remission Possible ball in honour of my young, inspirational constituent Emily Clark, who sadly died from cancer earlier this year. May we have a debate on the particular needs of young cancer patients when they suffer that terrible disease?

Mr Lidington: I associate myself with the expressions of sympathy and support for Emily’s family and friends over this appalling loss. As a Government we need to make sure that the NHS works hard on policies that are more effective in preventing, identifying, diagnosing and treating cancer in children and young people. That should be the case for all cancers, but we should be aware of how heartbreaking such cases are.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Are the Government preparing for a Division on tomorrow’s private Member’s Bill, or are the Whips lining up compliant, obsequious Back Benchers to try to talk it out?

Mr Lidington: On—of all subjects—private Members’ business, I have no idea whether people will seek to divide the House and whether Tellers will be appointed. The hon. Gentleman will have to indulge in the pleasures of delayed anticipation.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): Farmers in Blaenau Gwent are being forced to deal with antisocial behaviour from packs of off-road bikers, so may we have a debate on the impact of off-road biking and people riding roughshod over our countryside?

Mr Lidington: I would deplore the behaviour that the hon. Gentleman has described. Many off-road bikers observe the law and accept their responsibility, when enjoying their pastime, to respect the rights and economic interests of the people who manage and live in the countryside. I hope that the particular problem he described can be sorted out locally with effective work by the police and local authorities, but I am sure that he will find opportunities to raise the matter further in the House if that is not possible.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): Yesterday colleagues and I met the Immigration Minister to discuss plans to build a new short-term immigration detention centre in my constituency while the Dungavel facility is closing. That would result in moving detainees hundreds of miles—

Mr Speaker: Order. I do not want a speech read out, I want a one-sentence question.

Gavin Newlands: May we have a debate on the UK Government’s detention policy, which results in the UK detaining more people than anywhere else in Europe?

Mr Lidington: There will be Home Office questions on Monday 31 October. The hon. Gentleman may have the opportunity to raise his concern then.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Yesterday, I met Reverend Yunusa Nmadu from Christian Solidarity Worldwide. He said that Boko Haram continues to kidnap and brutally assault thousands of young Christian girls and marry them off. Will the Leader of the House agree to a statement or debate on this matter?

Mr Lidington: The British Government are doing all they can to support the Nigerian authorities, both in getting the return of the girls who have been abducted and ensuring there is effective action against the scourge of Boko Haram.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): England has witnessed a truly alarming rise in hate crimes against ethnic minorities and foreign nationals, and a 147% spike in homophobic attacks since the referendum. May we have a serious debate in Government time to discuss not only the problem but the action required to address it?

Mr Lidington: This matter has been raised with me during, I think, the past two business questions. I again say that I condemn, as do I think Members of all parties and on both sides of the referendum, the type of attack and abuse that the hon. Lady describes. It has no place whatever in our politics.

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): The Government have committed to a national shipbuilding strategy by the time of the autumn statement. Will the House have the opportunity to debate that, given the disgraceful delay in ordering the Type 26 frigates?

Mr Lidington: The Type 26 frigates are being built because there is a United Kingdom Royal Navy placing those orders in Scottish shipyards—something a separate Scotland would be unable to promise. There will of course be many opportunities in this House to debate industrial strategy and to look at shipbuilding as one element of it.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Will the Leader of the House tell us when he intends to schedule the promised urgent debate on the floor of the House on the proposed Canada-EU Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement?

Mr Lidington: In due course.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Convicted criminal Lord Hanningfield left jail and returned to a job for life in another place. He was then back up in court in July this year for similar offences. Why did the parliamentary authorities step in and tell the court that it was a matter for them to address rather than the court? Will the Leader of the House commit to reform?
Mr Lidington: All this was debated yesterday, when we had a debate on the House of Lords. I do not think I have anything further to add to what my hon. Friends said on that occasion.

Mr Speaker: I thank the House for its co-operation.

Community Pharmacy in 2016-17 and Beyond

11.22 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): With permission, I would like to make a statement on the future of community pharmacy. In December 2015, the Government set out a range of proposals for reforming the sector. Our intent was to promote movement towards a clinically focused pharmacy service that is better integrated with primary care and makes better use of pharmacists’ skills. I now wish to update the House on the outcome of this consultation and the measures we intend to take forward.

Let me be clear at the outset. The Government fully appreciate the value of the community pharmacy sector. There are now more than 11,500 pharmacies, an increase of over 18% in the past decade. Indeed, the overall pharmacy spend has increased by 40% over the past decade and now stands at £2.8 billion per annum. However, we do not believe that the current funding system does enough to promote either efficiency or quality; nor does it promote the integration with the rest of the NHS that we, and pharmacists themselves, would like to see.

The average pharmacy receives nearly £1 million per annum for the NHS goods and services it provides, of which about £220,000 is direct income. It includes a fixed-sum payment—the establishment fee—of £25,000 per annum which is paid to most pharmacies, regardless of size and quality. This is an inefficient allocation of NHS funds when 40% of pharmacies are now in clusters of three or more, which means that two fifths are within 10 minutes’ walk of two or more other pharmacies. There are instances of clusters of up to 15 pharmacies within a 10-minute walk of each other. When the overall NHS budget is under pressure and we need to find £22 billion in efficiency savings by 2020, it is right that we examine all areas of spend and look for improvements.

The measures that we are bringing forward today have at their heart our desire more efficiently to spend precious NHS resources. Community pharmacy must play its part as the NHS rises to this challenge. I am today announcing a two-year funding settlement. In summary, contractors providing NHS pharmaceutical services under the community pharmacy framework will receive £2.687 billion-worth of funding in 2016-17 and £2.592 billion in 2017-18. That represents a 4% reduction in 2016-17 and a further 3.4% reduction in 2017-18. Every penny saved by this re-set will be reinvested and reallocated back into our NHS to ensure the very best patient care.

Furthermore, separately commissioned services by NHS England, clinical commissioning groups and local authorities will not be affected by this change. I want to see this commissioning of services to continue to grow. From 1 December, we will also simplify the outdated payments structure; introduce a payment for quality so that for the first time we will be paying pharmacies for the service they provide, not just for the volume of prescriptions they dispense; and relieve pressure on other parts of the NHS by properly embedding pharmacy for the first time in the urgent care pathway.

As we continue the path of reform, we will be informed both by the review of community pharmacy services being carried out by Richard Murray of the King’s
Fund and by other stakeholders such as the Royal Pharmaceutical Society. NHS England is investing £42 million in a pharmacy integration fund for 2016-17 and 2017-18, which will facilitate the movement of the sector faster into value-added services.

Last week, for example, I announced two additional initiatives to improve our offer to patients. First, those who need urgent repeat medicines will be referred by NHS 111 directly to pharmacists—not to out-of-hours GPs as at present. Secondly, NHS England will encourage national roll-out of the minor ailment schemes already commissioned by some CCGs. This is expected to be complete by April 2018.

We are confident that these measures can be implemented without jeopardising the quality of services. In fact, we believe the changes will improve them. To safeguard patient access, we will be introducing a pharmacy access scheme in areas with fewer pharmacies and higher health needs. We are today publishing the list of pharmacies that will be eligible for funding from this scheme. Copies are available on gov.uk and from the Vote Office. The list includes all pharmacies that are more than 1 mile from another pharmacy. Those pharmacies will be protected from the full impact of the reductions.

In addition, we will have a review process to deal with any unforeseen circumstances affecting access, such as road closure. We will also review cases where there may be a high level of deprivation, but where pharmacies are less than a mile from another pharmacy, if that pharmacy is critical for access. This will cover pharmacies that are located in the 20% most deprived areas in England, are located 0.8 miles or more from another pharmacy and are critical for access. Additional funding over and above the base settlement will be made available as needed.

We have already announced NHS England’s proposal significantly to increase the number of pharmacists working directly in general practice. A budget of £112 million has been allocated and will deliver a further 1,500 pharmacists to general practice by 2020.

As Members will know, the Government consulted the Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee and other stakeholders, including patient and public groups. I am grateful for the responses that we received, which reinforced the value of community pharmacy and confirmed its front-line role at the heart of the NHS. The consultation also confirmed that there was a potential for the sector to add even more value. However, we are disappointed by the final response from the Pharmaceutical Services Negotiating Committee, because it was clear that there was little substantive difference between that settlement and their original proposal in December 2015, and that the outcome would be the same. Earlier this year the Minister’s predecessor, the right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt), said that up to 3,000, or 25%, of community pharmacies could close, and clearly the thousands of remaining pharmacies could be forced to scale down their services. If the Minister does not agree with his predecessor, will he now tell us how many community pharmacies he expects to close as a result of the Government’s cuts? Pharmacies that do survive the cuts will be under significant pressure, which will result in job losses and service reduction. That is putting patient safety and welfare at risk.

The cuts will have a significant impact on older people, people with disabilities or long-term illnesses, and, I reiterate, carers, who do not have time to look after their own health and often do not even seek GP appointments. The Minister has said nothing today about releasing an impact assessment. Given that the effect of the cuts is likely to be substantial, with rural, remote and deprived areas most affected, when will we see an impact assessment to justify them?

Let me end by stating my firm belief that the future for community pharmacy is bright. These vital reforms will protect access for patients, properly reward quality for the first time, and integrate care with GP and other services in a far better way. That is what the NHS needs, what patients expect, and, I believe, what the vast majority of community pharmacists are keen to deliver.
It seems to me that Ministers are ignoring the conclusion of a recent PricewaterhouseCoopers report showing that community pharmacies contribute a net value of £3 billion through just 12 of their services—not all of them; just 12. Therefore, if one in four community pharmacies were to close, that value would be lost and the cost to the NHS would be significantly increased. Has the Minister considered the long-term impact that that will have on other NHS services?

We know that there is concern in many parts of the healthcare sector about these proposals. Can the Minister reassure us that all parts of the health service, including NHS England, support the proposals? Earlier in the week, he said that no community would be left without a pharmacy, but he was then unable to say which pharmacies would close and where. Will he repeat the pledge that no community will be left without a pharmacy?

We recognise the need, as does the Minister, to integrate pharmacy services better with the rest of primary care, but introducing cuts on this scale to community pharmacy services will not improve health services—it will damage them.

David Mowat: Frankly, a lot of that was scaremongering, which does not help what we are doing here and does not help with some of the difficult decisions we have had to make. Those difficult decisions are directed at modernising the service, bringing it up to date, making it much more dynamic in terms of added value and less static in terms of dispensing and all that goes with that.

I will answer some of the specific points that were made. There is a full impact assessment and it will be released immediately after the statement.

The hon. Lady asked about the PwC report. I have said on the record on a number of occasions that the report is an excellent piece of work. It does drive home the point that, as I said in my statement, we are recruiting a further 1,500 pharmacists into the GP network. They will also play a big part in that integration.

Barbara Keeley: How many are closing?

David Mowat: The answer to that question is, I do not know. It is possible that none will close. I do not believe that 3,000 will close. However, I would say this. The average operating margin that the pharmacy makes on the numbers that I quoted earlier is 15%. That is after salaries and rent. The cuts that we are making, or the efficiencies that we are asking for, are significantly lower than that. Of course there is no such thing as an average pharmacy, which is why I cannot guarantee that there will be no changes. What I can say is that, if there are mergers and if there is some consolidation, that demand does not go away—it goes to the other pharmacies in the cluster. To say that those pharmacies will be put under more pressure is plain wrong.

I say again that what we are doing is building an industry that is fit for the future, that is modern and that is adding value in a way it has not been able to do in the past.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Two points. First, Members who arrived after the start of the statement should not expect to be called. Secondly, there is extensive interest in this important statement—interest that I am keen to accommodate—but as I emphasised earlier there are to follow two heavily subscribed debates under the auspices of the Backbench Business Committee. Therefore, there is a premium upon brevity. We will be led in our brevity mission by one of the most senior and illustrious Members of the House, Sir Alan Haselhurst.

Sir Alan Haselhurst (Saffron Walden) (Con): Does my hon. Friend the Minister acknowledge that the NHS has become such a part of the nation’s DNA that doctors’ surgeries are frequently overloaded, that absolutely the right way forward is to have a rational, well-spaced network of pharmacies and that that is of particular importance in rural areas?

David Mowat: I do recognise that. My right hon. Friend made the point that the network is well spaced and that rural areas are protected. I would also make the point that, as I said in my statement, we are recruiting a further 1,500 pharmacists into the GP network. They will also play a big part in that integration.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Are not these cuts the latest evidence of the unprecedented financial pressure the national health service is under? Is it not the case that cutting community pharmacy services is the very last place we should begin, as they take pressure off GP surgeries and hospitals and offer an excellent service?

David Mowat: This year we invested a further £5 billion in the NHS, three times the rate of inflation. In June the OECD noted we are now above average in terms of NHS and social care spend in the OECD. However much we spend, it is right we look to do it as efficiently and effectively as possible, to modernise this service and make it better for patients, and that is what we are doing.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (Con): The Minister knows my views: I do not think this 4% cut is a wise move. But I do note—and it is important that everybody reports this accurately—that that money is going to stay within the NHS, so it is not a cut. Can the Minister assure us about any incentives for pharmacies in the delivery of public health measures, notably preventive measures?

David Mowat: I thank my right hon. Friend for that comment and reassure her that for the first time we will be allowing pharmacists to access a quality fund, which means that the average pharmacy could earn up to...
£6,000 or £7,000 over and above what it gets just for dispensing. The fund will include specific measures around public health.

Mr Speaker: My apologies to the hon. Lady; I call Dr Philippa Whitford.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

We discussed this on Monday and, as I pointed out, Scotland has had a national minor ailments service, a chronic medicine service and public health prevention for many years within community pharmacies, and we have found them to be very effective. Research showed they could cut 10% of the pressure on GPs and 5% on accident and emergency.

The problem with the Government’s proposal is that it is going to be a bit random; pharmacies are just going to be shutting on the basis that they cannot survive. Should there not be a planned system, to look at and discuss where they should be? It is not just a question of rural or deprived. It is also about transport; a mile away may be a real problem for those who are elderly and frail and for whom there is not a bus going in that direction. I welcome England taking forward these services, but my concern is the way in which it is going to be done; if it is just done due to cuts, it might not give England the answer it really wants.

David Mowat: I thank the hon. Lady for her point. She mentioned Scotland’s minor ailments programme. The announcement I made on that about a week ago was in many ways modelled on the Scottish model, because we know that pharmacies can do much more on minor ailments than at present. That will be commissioned separately from the other things we are talking about today, and paid for separately from the integration fund. We are a little behind Scotland in that regard, and we are going to catch up.

Michael Gove (Surrey Heath) (Con): I congratulate the Minister on recognising what Labour failed to: that NHS money is taxpayers’ money and the priority should always be patient care, not the profits of private equity firms. May I further congratulate him on making it clear that those living in our most deprived communities will be protected and have services enhanced as a result of this change, and may I invite him to say more?

David Mowat: I will not say much more because of time constraints, but I thank my right hon. Friend. Friend for his comments. He is right to remind the House that this sector is quite concentrated towards public companies. That is not to say there are not some individual pharmacists that will be affected, but about 25% of pharmacies are owned by two or three public companies.

Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): I should declare my interest as chairman of the all-party group on pharmacy. I do not want to speculate about closures, as that has been done already, but if we get to a point where it might make sense for pharmacies to merge in different communities, my understanding is that the regulations are not yet in place for that. Is that true, and, if that is needed, when will it happen?

David Mowat: The right hon. Gentleman makes an extremely good point. They are not yet in place, but they will be by 1 December.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): I congratulate the Minister on his statement. It is worth reminding the House that many urban pharmacies are located in clusters and are very close to one another. It is therefore quite right that we should look at how they are subsidised. I am pleased that, as a result of these savings, he will be looking out for rural pharmacies, which are more dispersed. They are the ones that really need the help.

David Mowat: The access scheme to which I referred will apply to rural and urban pharmacies. Indeed, there is more urban than rural in it, but it will protect rural pharmacies in the way my right hon. Friend mentions.

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): There is no escaping the fact that this amounts to a significant cut in prevention services, which is what always happens when the finances of the NHS are under pressure. I absolutely accept the need for reform of the financial incentives involved, to ensure that we get the best outcomes from the money being spent, but surely we should be investing more in prevention in order to ensure that the NHS is sustainable.

David Mowat: The quality system that I have mentioned is about potentially investing more in prevention and linking the best pharmacies—the high quality pharmacies—more closely to local authorities, public health schemes and all that goes with that. I make the point again that there is a requirement for efficiency savings, but we do not believe that they will affect access overall. We do not believe that this will affect the public’s ability to use pharmacies as they do now. This will be part of modernising and digitising the service and providing resources for other parts of the NHS that need them very much.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): Bearing in mind my responsibility for the difficult equation that my hon. Friend has had to solve by coming to the House this morning, I should like to thank him and welcome his statement, which finally brings clarity to these long discussions. Will he repeat very clearly the Government’s absolute commitment to a strong community pharmacy network and to doing all they can to ensure that the NHS delivers on the essential commissioning of quality services? Looking ahead to the future, now that we have got past this, will he ensure that a good review of community pharmacy services is carried out, so that we can see what value they bring to the NHS? I am sure that, like me, he will find that sector extremely valuable to work with.

David Mowat: I thank my right hon. Friend for his fantastic work with the pharmacy sector. He makes the important point that we are trying to move the sector more into services and added value. The two announcements that I made two weeks ago are part of that, as is the work currently being done by Richard Murray from the King’s Fund. That will inform how we spend the integration money and enable the sector to move more quickly into the sorts of services that my right hon. Friend is talking about.
Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): Allison’s pharmacy in Cockermouth in my constituency helps to promote good health because it has a deep knowledge of the patients and their families. My concern is that, as a small pharmacy, it will be under more pressure from these cuts than the larger ones will be locally. Does the Minister recognise this pressure? Does he also recognise the vital community role that local pharmacies can play?

David Mowat: I repeat that we absolutely recognise the vital role that community pharmacies can play, and we want to make them move towards an even more vital role by providing more services, which is what pharmacies want to do, rather than getting all their money from their dispensing activities, as they do at the moment. High quality pharmacies will be in a position to really prosper in the new world that we are talking about.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I warmly welcome the Minister’s statement. If there are closures, what additional support will be given to the pharmacies that are left, particularly to enable them to take pressure off GPs in the community?

David Mowat: The volume of business is gradually increasing. If a pharmacy in a cluster should close, that business will be redirected to other pharmacies in the cluster. They will then be in a position to expand, take on more people and all the rest of it.

Keith Vaz (Leicester East) (Lab): I declare my interest as a type 2 diabetic and as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on diabetes. The Minister is wrong to say that Leicester has too many pharmacies. The fact is that the population demands those services. Instead of making these cuts, why does he not spend that £25,000 on diabetes prevention, thus saving the national health service a huge amount of money in the future?

David Mowat: I have never said that Leicester has too many pharmacies. What I said in answer to the urgent question was that one road in Leicester—Loughborough Road, I think—has 12 pharmacies within half a mile, and that is quite hard to justify.

As for the right hon. Gentleman’s other point about diabetes and long-term conditions, I mentioned the King’s Fund work being done by Richard Murray and addressing long-term conditions is the sort of value-added service that pharmacies need to provide in future. The £42 million integration fund that we have set aside will enable that to happen.

Nusrat Ghani (Wealden) (Con): I welcome the news that this Conservative Government are spending £150 million more a year on pharmacies than the last Labour Government and will be paying pharmacies for not only dispensing prescriptions, but their quality of service. In Wealden, pharmacies have the double whammy of being rural and serving an older community, but they provide much-needed services and home deliveries. What news can the Minister share with me that I can share with pharmacies in Wealden?

David Mowat: The news that I can share is that pharmacies that are more than 1 mile apart from each other, many of which will exist in rural constituencies such as the hon. Lady’s, will be largely protected under the scheme.

Paul Blomfield (Sheffield Central) (Lab): The Minister was right to describe community pharmacies as the essential front line of the NHS. What assessment has he made of the additional pressures and costs that will be put on other parts of the NHS as a result of this decision?

David Mowat: The King’s Fund study and the £42 million integration fund are directly focused on services and on enabling pharmacies to become more integrated with GPs. In addition, I repeat that 1,500 more clinical pharmacists than we have now will be working for GPs in 2020. That is a huge difference.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I thank the Minister for coming to the House today and welcome his statement and update. It is right to consider improvements, but in doing so I urge him to ensure that the reforms are part of a broader policy on community pharmacies that seeks better to integrate with the NHS the vital services that they provide.

David Mowat: I give the hon. Lady that assurance. She used the word “integration”, which is right at the core of the proposals, as is modernisation. This is a patient-first initiative and we are going to make it happen.

Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): It is interesting that the Minister keeps referring to the evils of major chains, because it is impossible to listen to his statement and not realise that he is talking about supporting big pharmacies. Smaller pharmacies, which do not have such a wide patient base and do not offer such a wide range of services, will suffer. Does he acknowledge that small pharmacies will close as a result of the changes? Will he say more about where the savings will come from?

David Mowat: The scheme that we are putting into place is blind to ownership, so we will not take into account whether a pharmacy is a Boots, a LloydsPharmacy or something smaller. Given the gross margins that are currently being made by the average pharmacy, including smaller ones, I do not believe that the efficiency savings that we are asking for will cause widespread closures. It is scaremongering to imply that.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): Those of us who represent constituencies with both remote rural and urban communities understand the difficult issues that the Minister and his Department have wrestled with. Does he agree that this decision is one that would have to be taken by whichever party was in government at the moment because it is right to ensure that the service is modern, efficient and that it represents security for people in rural communities?

David Mowat: Yes—modern, efficient and oriented towards excellent patient care.

Tom Blenkinsop (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): My constituency lies within the South Tees clinical commissioning group’s area, which is one of the pilots for the roll-out of the minor ailments service. The scheme was brought in due to the closure of minor injuries units at Guisborough and East Cleveland.
and medical centres at Park End, Skelton and Hemlington—all in my constituency. We are now seeing a shortfall in national vanguard funding for the minor ailments service and lack of GP provision in the region. What on earth is going on with primary care?

David Mowat: I do not wholly understand the thrust of that question. I assume that the hon. Gentleman, like others in this House, is welcoming the fact that we are rolling out a national system on ailments, delivered by pharmacists. As the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) said, that is the future.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): The Government are right to require pharmacies to make efficiencies, as the NHS is. I welcome the pharmacy access scheme, which I hope will help my local village pharmacies. I urge the Government and NHS England to press ahead with rolling out the minor ailments service, because it is important to make the most of the skills and capacity of pharmacies, in order to provide valuable services to patients and to relieve the burden on GPs.

David Mowat: I thank my hon. Friend for that comment, and I reinforce what I said earlier: NHS England plans to have this rolled out nationally by April 2018.

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): I recognise the difficult decisions the Minister has had to make, but rural pharmacies are going to be particularly hit. He has attempted to sweeten the pill with his access scheme, but it is only a two-year scheme. What support will be forthcoming beyond that?

David Mowat: This is the first time ever that we have given pharmacies a two-year planning horizon; usually, these negotiations relate to a one-year period. After the completion of this period, there will be further negotiations, at which point we will take forward what is right to do.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): I congratulate the Minister on the way he has sorted out this mess. Is this unnecessary and wasteful clustering of pharmacies not a direct consequence of the former Labour Government’s broken payment model?

David Mowat: I am not sure that takes us forward, but it is right to say that spending NHS money on payments of £25,000 to many pharmacies within half a mile of one other is the wrong way to spend money when we need more in cancer drugs funds, in GP surgeries and in accident and emergency—that is what we need to be doing.

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): A large number of rural villages and small towns in my constituency are served by individual local pharmacies, which play an important role in the community. I welcome the Minister’s comments about the access scheme. Will he reassure me that small pharmacies in rural areas such as mine will be among those to benefit from the access protections he has outlined?

David Mowat: Yes, I can reassure my hon. Friend on that. Indeed, I can make the specific point that the 25% that make up the largest pharmacies will not be in the access scheme; it is directed more at smaller pharmacies.

Lucy Frazer (South East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The Minister is right to identify that those areas with fewer pharmacies will benefit from protection, not only because the travel time to a pharmacy will be longer, but because the travel time to all support services will be longer. Will he therefore confirm that pharmacies in my rural constituency will benefit from the access scheme?

David Mowat: I do not have the specifics for my hon. and learned Friend’s constituency in front of me. We have published the full list and it is in the Vote Office, and I am sure that when she has a look at it she will find that some pharmacies in her area are protected.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): It is right to protect services by being more focused, but is there any other kind of commercial retail enterprise to which Government hand an establishment fee of £25,000?

David Mowat: Not that I know of, but there may well be. The facts are that the £2.8 billion that we currently spend is for services and for disbursing £8 billion-worth of drugs. It is a valuable service, but it is right that we look to see that that money is spent effectively and as effectively as in other parts of the NHS. It is the Government’s job to make sure that every penny that we give the NHS provides maximum value for patients.

Nigel Mills (Amber Valley) (Con): May I declare an interest, in that my wife is a community pharmacist? I should therefore probably be cautious in welcoming this statement, for obvious reasons. Will the Minister confirm that the proposals to have a hub-and-spoke model, which would have been even more damaging to community pharmacies, are not part of this step forward?

David Mowat: I can confirm that no part of what we are talking about today is in respect of the hub-and-spoke model that my hon. Friend talks about.

Mr Speaker: I am most grateful to the Minister and to colleagues for their helpful co-operation in facilitating progress on this important matter.

BILL PRESENTED

Housing Standards (Preparation and Storage of Food by Tenants in Receipt of Universal Credit or Housing Benefit)

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Frank Field, supported by Jeremy Lefroy, Caroline Flint, Dr Philippa Whitford, Sir Edward Garnier, Stephen Timms, Caroline Lucas, Sir David Amess, Tristram Hunt, Sir Peter Bottomley, Ruth Smeeth and Helen Jones presented a Bill to require landlords of tenants in receipt of universal credit or housing benefit to ensure that their rented accommodation meets minimum standards for the hygienic storage and preparation of food; contains adequate appliances, equipment and utensils for the cooking of food; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 4 November, and to be printed (Bill 79).
Backbench Business

Mr Speaker: I should inform the House that I have selected amendment (a), in the name of Mr Richard Fuller and others. In a moment, I shall ask the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) to move the motion. May I just emphasise that there are 14 Back-Bench Members who wish to contribute to the debate, and so even those who are not subject to a time constraint in any formal sense will doubtless wish to tailor their contributions to take account of the level of interest in the House?

12 pm

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House notes the recent joint Report by the Business, Innovation and Skills and the Work and Pensions Committees on BHS; endorses that Report’s criticisms of the governance of the company and of the holding company, Taveta Investments Limited; believes that the sale of the company to Retail Acquisitions Limited for £1 was clearly not in the interests of British Home Stores’ employees and pensioners; notes the failure of Sir Philip Green over many years to resolve the deficit in the BHS pension fund; and calls on him to fulfil his promise to do so forthwith.

May I thank the Backbench Business Committee for giving us the opportunity to have this debate? I do so on behalf of both the Work and Pensions Committee and the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee, because we are debating a two-Committee report.

In light of what you have just said, Mr Speaker, may I say that I know there will be lots of people wanting to intervene and, more importantly, wanting to contribute to the debate? While I am, of course, more than happy to take interventions, if those interventions could be more comprehensive picture for the people who are following this debate. My first view, which was never knocked in any of our Committee proceedings, including our meeting with Sir Philip Green, is that literally nothing happened in BHS or Arcadia, and perhaps in much else besides, without Sir Philip Green deciding directly, or without people knowing what his mind was and that they would get his approval. Obviously I never knew Napoleon—given my age, Members might think that I could have touched the hem of the garment of Napoleon—but in my mind’s eye, this was a character most like the Napoleon whom I read about in history books when I was at school. As there is always pressure for history to be rewritten, particularly from those who think it treats them unfairly, it is important to remember that when Sir Philip acquired BHS, it was a relatively prosperous business that had a pension scheme in surplus. The idea that somebody, out of the goodness of their heart, was charging to the rescue of some mega-failing of British industry is not borne out by the facts in our report or those that anybody else has published.

On the first theme, what do I see as the main findings of the report? Members will have their own views, and it will be great if they do as that will help us to build up a more comprehensive picture for the people who are following this debate. My first view, which was never knocked in any of our Committee proceedings, including our meeting with Sir Philip Green, is that literally nothing happened in BHS or Arcadia, and perhaps in much else besides, without Sir Philip Green deciding directly, or without people knowing what his mind was and that they would get his approval. Obviously I never knew Napoleon—given my age, Members might think that I could have touched the hem of the garment of Napoleon—but in my mind’s eye, this was a character most like the Napoleon whom I read about in history books when I was at school. As there is always pressure for history to be rewritten, particularly from those who think it treats them unfairly, it is important to remember that when Sir Philip acquired BHS, it was a relatively prosperous business that had a pension scheme in surplus. The idea that somebody, out of the goodness of their heart, was charging to the rescue of some mega-failing of British industry is not borne out by the facts in our report or those that anybody else has published.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): In light of the fact that the pension fund was left at the end with a £571 million deficit and the conduct of Sir Philip Green that my right hon. Friend described, must we also look more broadly at corporate governance to determine how an individual was able to behave in such a way in this country?

Frank Field: That is a wonderful point to which I shall draw attention. I hope my hon. Friend and others will catch your eye, Mr Speaker, to develop that point.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman for how he conducted the inquiry on a cross-party basis. Given his depiction of Mr Green as a Napoleonic figure, does the right hon. Gentleman share my concern that although Mr Green came to the Committee in June and asserted that he would fix the problem, several months later that does not appear to have taken place? Mr Green is reported in the media as saying that he will do so in the next couple of days, but the situation is very irregular, given the authority that he seems to have.

Frank Field: Again, that is an incredibly relevant point, and it links to the previous one. We were certainly left with the impression that the problem would be sorted shortly. There is no concrete proposal on the table to bring justice to the pensioners, and a question of corporate governance is raised about how someone can take over a company with its pension fund in surplus and a good order book. An interesting aspect of Sir Philip’s evidence to us was that he said he could have annuitised all the pension liabilities when he took over BHS, but decided not to do so. Had he done so, we would not be in this position today.

Mr Dennis Skinner (Bolsover) (Lab): Only a small point: this Napoleon thing has reared its head. I had always thought that Sir Philip Green was more of a
Maxwell. He had the money and he had the yachts. He had the workers and he robbed them of their pensions. It is almost a parallel.

Frank Field: Sir Philip has threatened to sue me over my comments about that. I am still waiting for the writ to arrive. I long to be in court to have a trial by jury, but that will be for another day.

I return to what I see as the main findings. There was some pretty important engineering going on from the early years in respect of the profitability of the company. We were much amused in Committee when Sir Philip said that his business prowess extended to halving the cost of coat hangers. It would have been more interesting, of course, for him to have told us about his secret share dealing with one main supplier who during those early years, because they were party to BHS decisions, knew the costs of other orders for which tenders were coming in and was therefore able to bid accordingly.

I maintain that thanks to that measure, Sir Philip was able to get perhaps artificially low supply costs, boosting BHS profits during that period, so it looked even more profitable than it was. That individual shareholder, as I say, was involved in a secret share deal. When he came to sell his shares, he managed to sell them for £90 million. Going on from there, we know that this played a key part in allowing £400 million in dividends to be taken from BHS, which most observers would not necessarily have seen as anything extraordinary.

The next stage of this sorry saga—my second theme—is, what was Sir Philip able to achieve from that BHS base? Gaining ownership—control—of BHS allowed him to acquire the group of companies known as Arcadia. From Arcadia, he managed to sponsor a huge gearing operation. Was it £2.6 billion? Was it £2.9 billion? However, the key thing about the ownership of Arcadia, which came only from what appeared to be the adequate—or more than adequate—running of BHS, was that there were huge sums of money sloshing around Arcadia. All too soon, £1.3 billion of money geared—loans acquired—on Arcadia through a number of companies found its way up to Lady Green.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way on this important point. Is that not the heart of the issue? The ability of corporate bandits to asset-strip in this way, leaving employees, pensioners and deferred pensioners in the lurch, is one of the key things that needs reform. It is one of the key reasons why people feel this country works for the Philip Greens of this world, rather than the working-class kids of Dover, Deal, Doncaster and Darlington.

Frank Field: Not for the first time, the hon. Gentleman reads my mind, because I wish to go on to that issue. Despite all the razzmatazz and so on, there was nothing that the Committee could find—no evidence of this was presented to the Committee—that showed that Sir Philip Green was king of the high street. He was, and is, a very successful traditional asset stripper, and I think that many people will want to develop that aspect of the debate.

Many of the workers in Arcadia must feel that they may stand ready to be pushed into the same hole as the BHS pensioners and workers. However, I think that a check has been put in place, and how that has happened is rather interesting. There was one of those wonderful moments during our hearings when one thinks, “Why is somebody telling me that?” Dominic Chappell—this triple bankrupt who was largely a creation of Sir Philip Green—told us that he had first refusal should the Arcadia group come up for sale, but that the only restraint was that Topshop would not be sold as part of that next sell-off. Of course, Topshop remains the crown jewels of Arcadia. It is the part of the Arcadia group that Sir Philip Green tried to take into America, and he succeeded. However, we now know that Sir Philip has had to sell part of his stake in Topshop to a company called Leonard Green—no relation whatsoever. It is inconceivable that that American financier would have agreed to buy into Arcadia without having the power to lock the till, so the idea that the Arcadia companies, and particularly Topshop, will see moneys moving from them to the Green family has clearly been stopped.

Why, the House might ask, if that is the only part of Sir Philip’s empire that is making money, did he sell? It comes back to those mega-loans of between £2 billion and £3 billion. Recently, they have had to be refinanced. Given what our Select Committees have brought out, I think that Sir Philip had real difficulty finding a refinancing champion and had to give access to the crown jewels—Topshop—to refinance those loans, half of which probably went very quickly through a network of companies up to Lady Green and the Green family.

Let me move on to my third theme: the Greek tragedy that has unfolded before us. Sir Philip has many times made the criticism of me that I am biased and that in the very first interview that I gave on this issue on the “Today” programme, when I was asked the straight question of whether I thought he should lose his knighthood, I said yes. Now, perhaps I should not have been a politician—maybe I should have deembled—but I actually answered based on what I then thought the evidence was, although I much wanted evidence to overthrow that original view. However, whether I held that view either publicly or privately, as to the idea that the two Select Committees that this House selected to represent it on business and on work and pensions matters could somehow be manipulated by me—fine chance.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): My right hon. Friend should consider the criticism of him made by Green as a badge of honour. He and I differ on a whole host of subjects, but he and my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright), who chairs the other Committee, have carried out their duties with distinction, and that should be recognised by the House.

Frank Field: I do not have time to go down that road, but I am really grateful to my hon. Friend. He always emphasises how much we disagree when he is agreeing with me, but I hope that does not mean that we both have re-selection problems coming down the tracks.

However, let me get back to this theme of Greek tragedy. We are dealing with a man who has tremendous wealth—it is difficult to comprehend what wealth he has. Yet, we know that he could have paid up—paid a modest amount, compared with that wealth base of £3.5 billion or whatever it is—and walked away smelling of roses. Not only that, but he would have helped the House, through our Committee system, to begin to set
the debate about how we face the whole challenge of pension deficits—that new era into which we have come. That would have helped to answer the question raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds): what lessons was Sir Philip drawing vis-à-vis corporate governance? In all those things, he could have been setting the debate. On pension deficits, and on the reform of private companies in particular, he had nothing to say, but he could have helped us to lead the debate.

Charlie Elphicke: Is not that the heart of the issue? Philip Green says he is sorry, but it comes across as crocodile tears, because he will not put his money where his mouth is. He ought to make recompense.

Frank Field: Indeed. Whatever the legal issues, there is a mega, mega, mega-moral responsibility.

Let me conclude my third theme of this Greek tragedy. Here we see—we have seen him before us in this place—a man who has everything in life and risks losing everything important in life: his standing and how his friends regard him. He does so because he seems somehow unwilling to surrender a modest part of his mega-fortune, but that modest part would make such a difference to those pensioners who are still awaiting their fate.

I turn to my fourth theme: what is being tested through our report, starting with our debate today? First, Members will have a chance to comment on how two of their Committees have carried out their work. I really hope that Lord Pannick’s rather appropriately named report, which would begin the Americanisation of our Committee system in which we would have no role, because all the lawyers would just take over and we would sit there like puppets, will be strongly resisted. I know other Members will want to talk about this “judgment”, but Lord Pannick’s report has shown that if you pay a lawyer, and they are friends of yours, they will come up with the opinion you want. That report does nothing for the legal profession. It is interesting that within moments of publishing this supposed report, Lord Pannick had to admit that he was very close friends with two of the key players whom we examined in this undertaking.

There are clearly questions about the Pensions Regulator that people will touch on today and the Work and Pensions Committee will look at. Are the organisation’s legal powers up to the increasing challenge that it faces? Does it have the right staff? Is it run with the right culture, and if not, what needs to change? Of course, the latter would be much more difficult to deal with than changing legal powers or getting the right staff.

What are the lessons for the Government? My hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) has already mentioned one lesson, which I have now learned—perhaps I should have done so long ago. I had somehow thought that private companies govern the future destinies of only a few employees at a time. Wow, was I wrong about that, considering Sir Philip Green’s empire in BHS, with all those 11,000 jobs destroyed, and the jobs at stake in Arcadia? My hon. Friend’s point about corporate governance is mega. It is a theme that fits in with the Prime Minister’s wish that in trying better to protect the vulnerable, soft underbelly of British society, we must look at how capitalism behaves in this country.

I have two more brief points. First, how do we ensure the independence of the bodies that are put into operation to try to recover the assets of a company that has gone down like BHS? Very important questions have been raised in respect of the recovery operation for BHS. Secondly, if we needed to address the staffing, powers and approach of the Serious Fraud Office, given that we are still waiting to know how it is going to respond, how would the appropriate Committee, and then this House, do so in a non-threatening way?

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend is making a very good speech. He touched on the professional advice that was given to Sir Philip Green. Part of that issue is the ongoing problem that we have with how the big consultancies operate in our country—Grant Thornton in this case, and in others—and the fact that the Serious Fraud Office increasingly depends on those consultancies.

Frank Field: The quicker I finish, the quicker my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright) will be able to deal with that matter and how his work on it has evolved.

This is the first time that I have stood before the House since I was elected Chairman of one of its Select Committees. I thank the House for electing me to that position. Despite the hard work, it has been a pleasure, particularly in relation to the work in which we, as comrades, have been involved during this inquiry.

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): I beg to move an amendment, at the end of the Question to add, ‘; and, noting that Philip Green received his knighthood for his services for the retail industry, believes his actions raise the question of whether he should be allowed to continue to be a holder of the honour and calls on the Honours Forfeiture Committee to recommend his knighthood be cancelled and annulled.’ I am fortunate to follow such a gracious speech by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), and to move the amendment standing in my name and the names of 113 other Members of this House.

I took part in the inquiry into British Home Stores not only as a member of the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee but as someone who believes passionately in the good that business can do. I have seen in my own life, and in countries around the world, that the force of market economies helps everyone. It helps people who want to earn a living and build a future for themselves and their families, and it creates a stable basis for broader freedoms in society to take hold.

However, in the course of our weeks of inquiry it became apparent to me that when we look at British Home Stores in particular, and at corporate governance in this country more generally, we see that all the rules that help set the stage for our market economy presume that with the freedoms given to people who have enormous power over thousands of their fellow citizens, when times are tough, or when push comes to shove, those people will do not just the legal thing but the right thing—the honourable thing. To some people, “honour”
In the course of our inquiry, a core issue was pensions. The right hon. Member for Birkenhead spoke in detail, as will other Members, about the shortcomings that have led to British Home Stores pensioners facing the prospect of lower pensions and the taxpayer facing the prospect of having to pick up the tab for the difference.

Another issue was the role of advisers. It was bizarre that among a fleet of well-paid advisers on a transaction, apparently the only voice that mattered was that of the adviser who said they were not an adviser. That may be okay if a person is dealing with just themselves and their family, but when they are dealing with people who are going to get up on Monday to try to earn a living in a shop, advice is important. We saw many times that the role of advisers was not just in giving advice; it was also in conveying an impression that this person was a person of substance. In an enterprise with £600 million of revenue, 11,000 employees, and responsibility for putting money into the pensions of 20,000 people, surely those running it should be people of substance—people with experience. What goes through the mind of a knight of the realm in saying that those livelihoods and those futures should be consigned to a three-time bankrupt? What goes through the mind of the owner of such a substantial business in thinking that the problems that he has faced, and found quite challenging, can more easily be solved by someone with zero experience of the industry that they are about to take on?

Richard Fuller: I am very grateful for the hon. Lady’s intervention, and I absolutely agree. I would say to people who worked for British Home Stores and want to be sure that we are dealing with issues that are tangible for them, and who are perhaps worried that the knighthood is a separate question, that we are debating those tangible issues. We are talking about what happened to their pensions and the fact that many people lost their jobs. Nevertheless, a symbolic, but still quite tangible, step that we can take in this House is to conclude that, as the hon. Lady says, such behaviours do not merit the continuation of an honour.

In their response this week, Lord Pannick and his colleague talked about governance issues. We were shocked to see that the response said that it was technically not the responsibility of the board of a holding company to attend even a meeting that disposed of a subsidiary, with all those livelihoods attached to it. Not doing so may not have been illegal, but for Lord Grabiner not even to have attended the meeting where the business was disposed of to a three-time bankrupt strikes me as calling into question the character of the members of the board. What went through their minds so that they did not think that was the right thing to do? They were not supposed to sign people into the wilderness with the brush of a pen, and for a Lord to do that points again to the fact that honour has to mean something in the behaviour of our businesses.

I want the Government to consider some further points. I do not have an answer on the question of the payment of dividends when there are pension deficits, but we need to look at it. Another issue to consider is transparency in large private companies, compared with that in public companies. Should the role of chairman continue to be precisely the same as that of other directors, or should the chairman have a greater role and responsibilities? What are the responsibilities of advisers?

Colleagues in the House have spoken to me privately and said that they may well agree that Sir Philip Green is no longer deserving of the knighthood, but they are not sure that the House has a role to play in that. Respectfully, I disagree. We are here to assert a view on the opinion of the people, and I think it is perfectly valid that we should consider the issue in the context of our report. It is on our work that we are expressing a view. We do not make the final decision, but it is worthy and honourable for this House to have a view about Sir Philip Green. Over the summer, Sir Philip has had the opportunity to find his moral compass and do the right thing. In the absence of that, the House has no option but to support the amendment and the motion.

12.31 pm

Mr Iain Wright (Hartlepool) (Lab): It is a genuine pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Bedford (Richard Fuller), who played such an important part not only in the BHS inquiry but in all other inquiries carried out by the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee. I am really proud of the work carried out by the members of my Committee and the Work and Pensions Committee. We came together extremely well to work forensically and diligently on the hundreds of hours of oral evidence and to consider thousands of pages of written evidence. It is significant that the final report was agreed unanimously, without a single vote being required. Such work was made possible only because of the professionalism and hard work not only of the members of the Committees but of their Clerks. I am very proud of the report and stand by every single word.

What came out of the evidence was a story of massive contrasts and of huge inequality—of tens of thousands of low-paid workers, and those trying to get by in retirement on a small pension, losing out because of the greed of a very small number of people who enriched themselves and gorged on BHS to the tune of millions of pounds.

BHS sold it to Dominic Chappell, but its demise was on the cards a lot earlier than that. In the three-year period...
between 2002 and 2004, BHS Group paid dividends of £423 million, even though operating profit for that period was significantly less than that amount, at £325 million. In 2004, BHS Group had dividends of £199.5 million, which exceeded the group's operating profit of £137 million for that year. The dividends of £199.5 million also coincided with a long-term loan of £200 million being taken out that year.

That dividend policy is revealing, and it set the scene for the eventual demise of the company. The payout to shareholders—predominantly the Green family—did not reflect a corporate turnaround and good transformation in business. BHS did not have the cash flow or the profits to fund the dividend. It denuded the company’s reserves and, in the case of that final dividend in 2004, had to be funded by a long-term loan.

Sir Philip could say, quite reasonably, as he did to the Committee, that he received dividends for only a short period of time early on in his period of ownership. It was a long time ago, that is true, but the dividend policy is crucial to understanding the whole sorry business of BHS and the wider lessons that we need to learn.

Green was to enrich himself, his family and his friends at the expense of long-term and sustainable growth for the company. Certainly profits were made, but they were more akin to a short-term sugar boost than a nutritious diet that aided the long-term health and strength of the business. Upon taking over the company, he was able to cut costs—an achievement that should not be easily dismissed—but he was never able to boost turnover throughout his ownership of BHS. So much for the king of retail.

It is true that Sir Philip Green owned the company for a total of nearly 15 years, and that he retained ownership a full decade after taking the last dividends. In that regard, he cannot be described as a short-term corporate raider. But raid the company he did, and his ability to do so meant that he was then in a financial position to obtain the debt to acquire Arcadia and, through the same modus operandi that he operated at BHS, pay his family the biggest corporate dividend in British history. He took the rings from BHS’s fingers, beat it black and blue, starved it of food and water and put it on life support, and then he wanted credit for keeping it alive.

BHS’s balance sheet was made considerably weaker during Sir Philip Green’s tenure of the company. His extraction of value early on in his ownership made the company less able to innovate, to retain a market share or to have a competitive place in the retail market that would allow the firm to generate profits and be in a better position to survive the growing pension deficit. That drip-drip decline provided the backdrop to Sir Philip’s wish to sell the business.

It would be difficult to come up with a more unlikely or incredible knight in shining armour than Dominic Chappell. He was a former bankrupt, with no experience or incredible knight in shining armour than Dominic Chappell. He was a former bankrupt, with no experience or incredible knight in shining armour than Dominic Chappell. He was a former bankrupt, with no experience

Yet the due diligence carried out by the myriad advisers on the transaction did nothing to stop or even pause the deal. There was a remarkable amount of group-think among the supposedly independent advisers. Grant Thornton received four times the fee that it normally receives from similar transactions. Retail Acquisitions Ltd did not have the means to pay advisers for their services unless the deal with BHS went through. The fact that RAL did not have the cash to pay the invoices, let alone to provide the working capital for a loss-making £600 million business with a half-a-billion-pound pension deficit, should have rung alarm bells up and down the City as to whether the engagement should have been taken on. The fact that it did not clearly gives rise to questions about whether impartial advice was provided, or whether blind eyes were turned to ensure that the fees would be paid through a successful transaction, regardless of whether the company toppled over soon after that.

Goldman Sachs provided Sir Philip with “preliminary observations” and was not paid. The lack of any clear letter of engagement showed appalling levels of formality, given that tens of thousands of jobs were at stake. As the hon. Member for Bedford said, the fact that Dominic Chappell was able to say that Goldman Sachs was on board gave his bid credibility. There is a certain irony in the fact that the firm that was not paid, that had an ambiguous role in the transaction and that claimed that it was merely providing preliminary observations was the only one that really expressed concern about the transaction, noting that “there were risks attached to the proposal in light of the lack of retail experience, the bankruptcy and the highly preliminary nature of the proposals and so on and so forth”.

Goldman Sachs’ attitude to document management seemed to be on a par with that of a dodgy and ramshackle cowboy operation, rather than that of supposedly the world’s premier consulting firm. If that approach was deliberate, in the belief that an informal approach to the transaction would exonerate it of any involvement, it was wrong. Although it was ultimately not responsible for the decisions taken—that was the responsibility of Sir Philip Green—its involvement mattered. It was up to its neck in it, even to the extent of offering a £40 million credit facility.

The risk to their reputation should have made those advisers think again. Much store is placed on the high-quality advice given by such advisers—certainly, in the case of BHS, the use of such prestigious names gave parties credibility and legitimacy when they should have had none.

This was all made possible by weak and incompetent corporate governance. We on the Committee saw opaque structures, overlapping board membership of a complex web of companies and ineffective leadership at board level. Lord Grabiner, chairman of the ultimate selling company, played no effective part. He was not present at, or even invited to, a meeting of the Taveta board that took the ultimate decision to approve the sale of BHS to Chappell. Lord Grabiner showed no curiosity in the deal. He was docile and demonstrated no effective scrutiny, challenge or leadership. That was indicative of a culture, common in corporate governance scandals, in
which a domineering, overbearing and bullying individual was able to get away with things with little, if any, challenge.

That is a key reason for the Select Committee’s decision to undertake an inquiry into corporate governance. Given our experience with BHS, we want to look at whether company law is sufficiently clear on the role of executive and non-executive directors and whether their duties are the right ones. We are examining how the interests of shareholders and other stakeholders are balanced, and how decisions of boards could be better scrutinised and open to challenge. Given BHS’s status as a private, non-listed company, how should we align the corporate governance arrangements and requirements between listed and private companies more clearly, so that it is not in the interests of chief executives or directors to take firms private to hide them from effective scrutiny and transparency?

It may be argued that the Green family, as ultimate shareholders, could do whatever they wanted with BHS, and they did. But a company with tens of thousands of workers and former employees, dependent on its long-term viability, cannot be run as a personal fiefdom or a massive piggybank—even though BHS was run in that way—and corporate governance rules and regulations should, no doubt, be adapted to reflect that.

The duties of directors are somewhat vaguely defined. Section 172 of the Companies Act 2006 states that a director of a company must promote the success of that company in such a way as to have regard for “the likely consequences of any decision in the long term—the interests of the company’s employees...the need to foster the company’s business relationships with suppliers, customers and others” and the desirability of the company maintaining a reputation for high standards of business conduct”.

Mr Sheerman: The BHS employees who lost their jobs in towns such as Huddersfield say to me, “Why is it that the advisers, consultants and auditors who did not do their job in the banking crisis are, all this time later, still not doing their job as auditors and professional people?”

Mr Wright: As the hon. Member for Bedford mentioned, we need to look at more than just reputational risk. A lot of deals go through simply because such advisers are involved. Is that good enough?

To return to my point about directors, can anybody look at BHS and say that the spirit and the intention of section 172 of the 2006 Act were being enforced? In companies legislation, directors are equal in status, but in the corporate governance code, chairs and leadership are given much more priority. Given the shocking absence of leadership or challenge from Lord Grabiner, who was truly hopeless, and the weak and impotent corporate governance operating here, there is a strong case for enshrining the requirements of the code in legislation.

As the hon. Member for Bedford said, Sir Philip received his knighthood for services to retail. During our inquiry, however, it became increasingly evident that he was not particularly good at retail at all. True, he was able, in the early days, to sniff out a corporate bargain and cut costs to boost profit. There is nothing wrong with that; that is not a criticism. But during his ownership, he did not boost BHS’s turnover, he lost market share to more nimble and even to not-so-nimble competitors and he failed to anticipate the online retail revolution. By failing to innovate and invest in that brand, he made BHS—an important anchor in the high street—look like a remnant of the 1970s and 1980s in a cut-throat, competitive sector, where grabbing the customer’s attention and retaining their loyalty are paramount.

Sir Philip lacked the success, the ingenuity and the business acumen of the likes of Charlie Mayfield, whose John Lewis group responded well to the internet and whose employee ownership model genuinely motivates staff. He could not match the virtues of Zara, which has increased market share through its superfast turnaround from design to manufacture and shop, which is based on the use of customer data and local suppliers, the rapid turnover of stock and an innovative online platform. Based on company performance, people such as Charlie Mayfield and the founder of Zara, Amancio Ortega, should, it seems to me, be classed as the true kings of modern retail—not Sir Philip Green.

BHS is one of the biggest corporate scandals of modern times. I am sure that the whole House has sympathy for the thousands of workers and pensioners who have lost their jobs and seen their pension benefits reduced as a result of greed, incompetence and hubris. The reputation of business has been tarnished as a result of that greed. The vast majority of businesses are not run and managed in such a way. It would be wrong to tar all businesses with the same brush, but it is vital that this mess is sorted.

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the cogent way in which he has presented his argument. I have no difficulty in supporting the motion, which is in his name and the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) and others. In principle, I agree with the amendment in the name of the hon. Member for Bedford (Richard Fuller) and others. My only question—my hon. Friend may be able to help me with this—is whether now is the right time to accept the amendment, or whether it should be left in abeyance until some of the other issues have been sorted out.

Mr Wright: Parliament will have its view on the knighthood. There is an urgent need to make sure that the pension problem is sorted. Sir Philip Green appeared before us on 15 June and said that he would sort it, but we are now four months beyond that. He is meant to be the consummate deal maker, who can buy and sell companies worth billions of pounds in a couple of days. If he is intent on sorting this, why has it not been done already? Regardless of what Parliament decides today, and regardless of the route taken by the honours forfeiture committee in respect of the knighthood, he has got a duty to sort this. Even at this late stage, Sir Philip should make amends for this whole sorry story and put right the wrongs that he engineered.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): Order. Before we proceed with the debate, it is obvious to the House that we have a short time this afternoon. I expect this debate to finish at about half-past 2. I do not want
to put a time limit on such an earnest, decent and well-mannered debate, and I hope that Members will restrict themselves to some seven minutes. If everyone who has indicated that they wish to speak does so for about seven minutes, everyone will get a fair and equal chance. If not, I will impose a time limit.

12.47 pm

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the wise words of the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright), and it was a pleasure to serve with him on the joint Committees. May I associate myself with the remarks that he and the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) have made about our hard-working Committee Clerks throughout the process?

When the news of BHS broke, I felt bad about the loss of a high street icon, desperate for the employees affected—including those in my constituency—and very concerned about the pensioners involved. I have a confession to make to the House, however. My gut reaction was that a Committee inquiry would simply rake over the ashes of a sad event, with little to be gained. I was initially not convinced that the inquiry would be productive, but I was persuaded to take part. I am glad that I did, and I am glad that this inquiry has taken place, because we can lay concerns before the House.

The largest concerns, for me, are not particularly about the trading circumstances leading to the demise of BHS—although it seems, as the hon. Member for Hartlepool has said, as though there was little magic around the revitalisation of BHS’s margins in the early years of its ownership by Sir Philip Green. Dividend payments, generous as they were and exceeding profits as they did, may or may not have undermined BHS through underinvestment. That would be hard to prove, but it is a perfectly sensible question to pose.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Should we not be raising questions if any company pays out dividends in excess of its free cash flow? That should ring alarm bells, and perhaps there should be a test that companies need to meet if they behave in such a way.

Jeremy Quin: The hon. Gentleman, as so often, reads my mind. If he is a little patient, he will hear me make a similar point later in my speech.

On the period during which very generous dividends were paid, directors cannot be expected to have the gift of prophecy, but they can be expected to understand the fundamental trends driving the underlying profitability and sustainability of their business. I am far from convinced that that was the case in this situation. The most serious questions, as raised by the hon. Members for Hartlepool and for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds), are about the corporate governance of large private companies with millions of employees and pensioners.

Unlike my feisty friend, my hon. Friend for Bedford (Richard Fuller), I intended not to refer to the individuals directly concerned in the sad demise of BHS, but to focus on the more general lessons to be learned. I am afraid that I have been drawn back to the circumstances of BHS after reading the joint legal opinion produced for Taveta Investments Ltd by learned counsel last night. As the right hon. Member for Birkenhead said, the two lead QCs make a point of saying that they are friends of the chairman of TIL. I hope that their report, which is considerably longer than the report of the joint Committees that it analyses, was not unduly costly. The report basically starts by saying, “Let’s pretend this is not a parliamentary inquiry, but some other kind of inquiry. Would that type of inquiry be set aside by the courts?” Having set up an irrelevant question, the opinion produces an irrelevant answer.

Michelle Thomson (Edinburgh West) (Ind): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is somewhat ironic for Sir Philip, who has complained bitterly about an outcome with which he does not agree, to be able to pay handsomely for an 81-page report from two eminent QCs, given that I imagine the pensioners and employees are not, unfortunately, able to resort to such a tactic?

Jeremy Quin: I suppose the answer depends on the quality of the report. Frankly, having read it, I find that it contains a series of straw men that have been set up for demolition. In my view, it does not help Members, the pensioners or anyone to understand the circumstances of the demise of BHS.

To put at rest the minds of learned counsel, the joint Committees did not object to a dowry being provided on the sale of BHS, and certainly did not question its legality. However, we questioned the sufficiency of the cash and the choice of partner in the circumstances that BHS faced. We did not question the concept of a company being sold for £1. Clearly, that is a matter for Taveta Investments (No. 2) Ltd, the selling company, which received the £1. It is unfortunate that TIL2, which is ultimately controlled by Lady Green, is still paying back to Lady Green the £200 million consideration for its acquisition of BHS in 2009. This consideration was satisfied by £200 million of loan stock provided to three overseas companies controlled by Lady Green, with a coupon of 8%.

We would need a much longer debate—I am very mindful that other Members wish to participate—to draw out all the straw men contained in the joint opinion of learned counsel, but several others are produced in the context of corporate governance. A rare point on which the joint Committees’ perspective seems to be shared by learned counsel is on the—in our view, lax—governance of the sale, as was so eloquently described by my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford. However, learned counsel state that that is an irrelevance, because the shareholders in TIL could in any event provide a direction, so the directors were in no position to prevent the sale of BHS to any party. That may be true legally, but it should raise questions for this House. Learned counsel tell us that TIL is 88% owned by Taveta Ltd, a company registered in Jersey, and 12% by six minority shareholders. We are informed that the ultimate beneficial owner of the Jersey company is Lady Green, and that under the articles, Lady Green, acting with any one of the minority shareholders, could have directed the sale of BHS at any time and on any terms.

The right to own and dispose of property under English law is absolutely fundamental, and Parliament would be wise to tread very softly, but I am concerned in this context about checks and balances—not only on
the sale, but more generally. What is the value of a section 172 provision, telling directors to have regard to other stakeholders, in these circumstances? What is the role and purpose of non-executive directors, especially when the 88% shareholder is not present around the boardroom table?

To my mind, it is not appropriate for directors serving private companies to decide that they can take an approach different from what is good corporate governance, purely because they can ultimately be directed. That would make it more important, especially on major or related transactions and on honouring commitments to pensioners, that they should bend over backwards to adhere to strong and demanding codes and be prepared to call out owners if they feel actions are taken that do not have sufficient regard to other stakeholders. There are thousands of very successful large and medium-sized private companies employing millions, and for those millions, ownership should be as transparent as good corporate governance.

There are other issues, from which I fear I have been sidetracked by the legal opinion, that the House should consider. As the hon. Member for Hartlepool mentioned, corporate governance codes should be applied not only to listed companies, but to those owned privately. On related party transactions, independent valuations or independent opinions are important when such transactions exceed de minimis levels. There is the issue of the utility of the requirement to have regard to other stakeholders in section 172 and how directors can be expected to do so when they owe responsibility elsewhere. There is the question of the appropriateness of dividend payments above certain thresholds, particularly if a pension scheme is in serious deficit. I was challenged on that point by the hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford).

There is the issue of the requirement for courts to be cognisant of pension deficits, as well as of creditors, when considering applications for corporate restructurings and capital reductions. In private mergers and acquisitions, where pension problems may be less transparent than in the listed market, consideration should be given to compulsory engagement with the Pensions Regulator and with the trustees. For both directors and advisers engaged in sale processes in respect of a company in which the Pensions Regulator has already expressed concern and a sale is not being pre-cleared by the Pensions Regulator, all parties should be very aware of the actuality of the counterparty to whom they are selling. English law requires no due diligence to be done on the buyer—or, in my mind, should it do so—but common sense suggests a certain wariness to be wise.

In conclusion, there are lessons to be learned from this sad story. Above all, however, we are all focused on the loss of a well-loved icon, the employees who have been made redundant and the pensioners who are rightly worried, but whose plight may yet be mitigated by Sir Philip. Such an act would, indeed, be honourable and very welcome. I understand from the radio this morning that he is, not for the first time, planning to meet the regulators in the next few days. Time will tell whether pensioners have been waiting for a result or have been made to endure a particularly poorly directed “Waiting for Godot”.

Mr David Winnick (Walsall North) (Lab): This is, indeed, a miserable business that we are discussing. We should not forget for one moment those who have been adversely affected—the 11,000 employees and the 22,000 pensioners, who do not know whether they will receive the sort of pension that they had the right to expect. One of the BHS stores was in the Walsall borough and, like the others, it has of course closed. The least that can be done is for Philip Green to act along the lines stated in the conclusion of this report—a satisfactory resolution to the problems of the BHS pension fund. As the report makes clear, there is no doubt that his massive private wealth should not in any way make that difficult for him.

I have risen to speak because I am very keen to support the amendment, which has been selected for debate by the Speaker. It is of course true that taking away Green’s knighthood, should it be recommended by the appropriate committee, will not make any financial difference to those adversely affected—they will not receive a penny more because the knighthood has been taken away—so why, if there is a vote, should we vote in its favour? I argue that for that honour to be taken away from Green would be a form of censure on him and, moreover, one that he would intensely dislike. As far as he is concerned, the removal of his knighthood would be far more of an indictment than all the words in the report we are discussing.

Mention is made in the report of the arrangements in Monaco concerning the business and tax. I am not entirely a stranger to those matters, because I raised the issue in a debate on taxes in the House in September 2012. I made the point then that although Philip Green undoubtedly pays his taxes in the usual way in this country—that is not in doubt and is not being questioned; he is not one of those who are not domiciled for tax reasons—that does not alter the fact that, in the main, the business is in his wife’s name, and his wife is resident in Monaco. That means that, in effect, the amount of tax paid on the vast business empire that Green is closely involved in—which, in common-sense terms, means he owns those businesses—is minimal. I find it difficult to understand how a person with tax arrangements like that, which are well known, well publicised and no secret at all, should receive a knighthood in the first place. That is a pretty damning indictment of what occurred, in my view.

As for Green’s vast amount of wealth, at that time I pointed out that he had paid himself a modest sum in bonuses that came to £1.2 billion—billion, not million. I do not know what other bonuses he has received since. Hardly a week goes by—one would say, hardly a day—when we do not pick up a newspaper and find details of his lavish lifestyle, which is a billionaire’s lifestyle if ever there was one. Is that not a form of provocation, apart from anything else, to the people who have been adversely affected, namely the employees and pensioners who have lost out and have a future of financial insecurity?

I will keep my remarks brief, and so say this in conclusion: I see Green as a billionaire spiv who should never have received a knighthood and who has shamed British capitalism. The least we can do today is to make our views clear and strong. Moreover, let us apply enough pressure, if that is not an inappropriate word, to
try to persuade the appropriate committee that if there is one person who does not deserve a knighthood, it is Philip Green.

1.2 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): This debate has been called in several of our names, and I take particular pleasure in following the speeches of many earlier contributors, but especially those of the Chairman of our Select Committee, the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), and my colleagues on the joint Committees, the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright) and my hon. Friends the Members for Bedford (Richard Fuller) and for Horsham (Jeremy Quin).

I will start by saying what the debate is not about. It is not an attempt to suggest that the deficit of any pension scheme in this land is entirely the fault of one individual, or, indeed, the responsibility of the owner of any sponsoring scheme. It is also worth noting that, of the some 6,000 defined-benefit pension schemes in the United Kingdom, about 1,000 are in difficulties of various kinds and very few indeed have surpluses. The situation of the BHS pension scheme is not particularly unique, but the circumstances around it are.

That brings me to my second point. The deficits of pension funds go up and down. They do so particularly quickly at a time when interest rates are moving fast. The value of assets is driven by bond yields; when those are depressed, and that is exacerbated by quantitative easing and monetary policy, pension deficits will clearly rise. All sorts of people are responsible for that, including the scheme’s investment policy makers and investment managers; the costs of all those involved make a significant difference to the scheme deficit as well. I totally accept the argument in the 80-page report by Sir Philip Green’s lawyers that longevity and the macro-economic environment make it difficult for schemes to improve their funding situation.

Ian Blackford: I agree with every comment that the hon. Gentleman has made, but does he not accept that part of the difficulty we are in with defined-benefit schemes has been the Government’s policy of giving responsibility to the Bank of England in the quantitative easing programme, which is now at £435 billion? If we look at what has happened recently, the 50 basis point reduction in yields means about £120 billion on the defined-benefit pension deficit. The Government have created that by refusing to balance fiscal and monetary policy.

Richard Graham: I do not remotely accept the argument in that intervention. This is not a debate about the Bank of England’s monetary policy. The hon. Gentleman would be well advised to read the transcript of the Work and Pensions Committee’s hearing with the Bank of England Deputy Governor three days ago, which I chaired in the absence of the right hon. Member for Birkenhead—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) is not paying attention, as usual. He would be well advised to read that evidence. Getting rid of quantitative easing will not solve the pension scheme problems, and, in particular, will not solve the problems of the BHS pension scheme. With his approval, I will return to the subject we are discussing.

Before the hon. Gentleman intervened I was remarking that the circumstances of the BHS pension deficit were extraordinary, and that is what I want now to come on to. The BHS scheme went from surplus to large deficit in about 10 years, without any clear plan or any really significant action by the sponsor, without decent relationships between the trustees and the sponsor, with conflicts of interest between some of the trustees appointed by the sponsor that they largely did not recognise during our inquiry, and with contribution holidays in the years when Taveta Investments, the owner of BHS, was taking out large dividends. All that cannot, by any stretch of the imagination, be described as best practice. The plan put forward to resolve the deficit—a staggered series of injections over 23 years—without any evidence of a long-term commitment by the owners to the company, is also not best practice. Our report highlighted that there was an issue with the regulator approving very long-term solutions.

Then we come to the moment of the sale of BHS, when information was withheld both from trustees and from the Pensions Regulator. There was a certain amount of dispute between the seller and the buyer about pre-clearance on the buyer not to communicate with the Pensions Regulator at all, which was reiterated in further evidence submitted to the Select Committee only yesterday by RAL, the buyer. Most significantly, there was no attempt whatever at pre-clearance of the sale with the Pensions Regulator. Most shocking of all to many of us is the concept from both the buyer and the seller that in effect BHS was being sold debt-free, yet it had such an enormous pension deficit. That is at the very least disingenuous. It was naive of the buyer and cynical of the seller.

That brings us to Sir Philip Green himself. He said on 15 June:

“I want to respond to Mr Graham...We want to find a solution for the 20,000 pensioners. We still believe that money into the PPF does not resolve it. Without getting into it...the schemes are quite complex...We will sort it and we will find a solution. I want to give an assurance to the 20,000 pensioners—I am there to sort this in the correct way.”

With that, none of us could disagree. The question, of course—and this is why today’s motion and debate are important—is what has happened in the four months since. There has been some dialogue with the Pensions Regulator. That is absolutely clear. But the public want to know when this is going to be resolved. They are worried that after our report nothing is really going to happen and that an important and powerful man will not be held to account. Today is an opportunity for this House to stress our commitment to holding Sir Philip Green to account.

Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con): I had a pension scheme collapse in my constituency about 12 years ago, the Federal-Mogul scheme. Schemes go into the PPF and there are assessments, and all the while that that is going on there is uncertainty. Does my hon. Friend not agree that Philip Green should deal with the situation as he has said he would—well, first of all he should have his knighthood taken away—because all the uncertainty impacts on those poor BHS pensioners?

Richard Graham: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, and that is why—I intend to finish my remarks on this note—today’s debate matters. It is not about grandstanding.
It is not about Parliament trying to demonstrate moral superiority over the behaviour of individuals. What it is about, I believe, is to say three important things.

First, to Philip Green we are saying, “You made a commitment. We accepted it in good faith and we expect you to fulfil it.” I believe that waiting too long is damaging to his reputation, whereas a quick resolution would be extremely helpful to him. Secondly, the debate is a chance to say to the employees of other large businesses and the people of Britain in general, “We understand your resentment of your employers and the people of your country. What you are saying is not let you down.” Finally, it is a chance to say to the pensioners of BHS, “We held this inquiry and we will not let you down.” Finally, it is a chance to say to the pensioners and the future pensioners of BHS, “We held this inquiry and we will be protected from what is now fully acknowledged as a systemic risk.”

Since that statement, despite questions from the SNP, there has been silence from the UK Government. Where is the response to the fundamental challenges facing pensioners today and what some might argue is a crisis for defined-benefit schemes? When will the Government face up to the challenges and threats to many who are beneficiaries of those schemes? When will the Government respond in detail to what the former Work and Pensions Secretary said was “systemic risk”? That was no throwaway line; a senior Cabinet Minister was admitting what we know to be the case. Does the Minister agree with that assessment given to this House and will she address the point this afternoon? What are the Government doing to deal with their own analysis of systemic risk? Sadly, I suspect the answer is still nothing.

Nothing is being done. The Government have been caught like a rabbit in the headlights—caught doing nothing in the face of systemic risk that threatens the interests of pensioners up and down the country. In the light of the Government sitting on their hands, I welcome the recently announced Select Committee inquiry to examine the adequacy of the Pension Regulator’s powers. That must be welcomed, but why should we be reliant on the Work and Pensions Committee? Why are the Government not doing their job and addressing this issue?

Scottish National party MPs will work to strengthen the powers of the regulator to ensure that the Philip Greens of the world are dealt with effectively when they seek to avoid their pension responsibilities. It is, however, a duty of Government to protect citizens from undue pensions risk and the systemic risk to which the Secretary of State referred. Ultimately, defined-benefit pension schemes need to be placed on a sustainable footing and employees must be protected. I look forward to seeing whether the Minister responds to this when she makes her speech, but perhaps I should not hold my breath. More likely, she will have a Government briefing of handwringing, and then she will wait for the debate to end and scurry for cover. After all, we do not expect real answers from this Government.

Brexit means that pension disasters such as BHS and Tata Steel will be much more likely challenges for UK companies. Only when companies are able to afford to keep their promises to employees can pension funds be regarded as safe. Even large and successful companies can fail. The Pension Protection Fund offers help in such cases, but Cass Business School forecasts that up to 1,000 pension schemes could end up in the PPF over the next few years. There are more BHS disasters to come if that is correct. There will be a combined deficit of £45 billion, which would be overwhelming.

Let us try to take this out of politics. The SNP has long called for the establishment of an independent pensions commission to ensure that employees’ savings...
[Ian Blackford]

are protected and a more progressive approach to fairer savings is considered as we move to a period in which defined-benefit schemes are becoming a thing of the past. Why will the Government not do that? Why do we not establish a pensions commission that can consider all these issues in a holistic manner?

Let us come back to BHS—[HON. MEMBERS: “Yes.”]

Well, of course Government Members do not want to talk about the Government’s responsibilities, because they have run away from them. They can scoff and laugh, but 20,000 pensioners at BHS are going to suffer and thousands of people have lost their job while the Government looked on from the sidelines. That is the reality of this Tory Government.

Let us come back to BHS, perhaps this time without the laughter from the Government Members. I hope the BHS workers are watching the response of Government Back Benchers. How disgraceful; how contemptuous of people in this country!

Richard Graham: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Jeremy Quin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Bingham: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Ian Blackford: I will make some progress and then perhaps I will give way—[ Interruption. ] I will give way in a second.

Philip Green’s weak apology is a case of too little, too late. He lined his pockets and did not stop to think about his employees. On Tuesday 18 October, Philip Green decided to say he was “sad and very sorry” for the hardship caused by the BHS collapse and that he still wanted to sort out the pension deficit. Green has still tried to defend the indefensible and duck his duties to workers by shifting the blame.

Jeremy Quin: I am grateful for being allowed to intervene on the hon. Gentleman. The point that Government Members are making is simply that we have heard a very long speech about systemic pension risk. That may be an issue, but it could be an issue for another occasion. The Select Committees produced a worthy report of more than 60 pages specifically about BHS. I am relieved that the hon. Gentleman is actually addressing BHS, the employees who have lost their jobs and the pensioners who have been left with less benefits than they should rightly have expected. I am delighted he is finally getting to that part of his speech. We look forward to the rest of it.

Ian Blackford: I thank the hon. Gentleman. I am aware of the time and I am about to sum up. The point I was making is that we have been put in a situation whereby workers have suffered as a consequence of the actions of Philip Green, but the Government must not think that they can walk away from their responsibilities to regulate business and pension schemes in this country effectively.

I recognise that Sir Philip owes it to the BHS pensioners to find an urgent resolution, but we need to look at corporate governance in the UK to see what can be done to offer protection from the kind of corporate excesses that have taken place with BHS. The Prime Minister has talked about doing that, so she should bring forward the proposals. While Philip Green’s hands are filthy, the Tory Government’s paws are not so clean either. After a lifetime of shying away from an effective crackdown on the corporate irresponsibility of the likes of Green, we are beginning to catch up in the United Kingdom. It is about time that the UK Government took action and the Minister gave us some answers.

1.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Margot James): I warmly congratulate the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) on securing this afternoon’s very important debate. I thank him, the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright) and both Select Committees for their invaluable work in exposing the governance and decision-making issues that have contributed to terrible consequences for so many people formerly of BHS.

Reading the report made me painfully aware of the responsibilities of directors. Under section 172 of the Companies Act 2006, directors must have regard to the interests of employees and customers, and the impact on the community. BHS should have been making plans to mark its 90th anniversary in 2018, instead of which all its stores have now closed, and its employees—some, like Mrs Patel, are mentioned in the report—who had spent most of their working lives building the value of BHS have seen their careers end in redundancy and uncertainty, rather than the secure retirement to which they had been looking forward and had a right to expect.

Richard Graham: I simply want to say that it is wonderful to see the Minister in the Chamber today. She is absolutely not scurrying away from anything—I have never seen her scurry away from anything in her life. Does she agree that on a day when we are debating a Back-Bench motion arising from a report by entirely cross-party Committees, the members of which worked incredibly well together, it is really disappointing to hear the SNP spokesman acting like an agitated Humpty-Dumpty talking about monetary policy?

Margot James: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention and for his work. Disappointed I may be, but not surprised. My thoughts—and, I know, those of Members of all parties—are with the ex-BHS workers, pensioners and their families.

We have heard about two owners of BHS: Philip Green, who bought the company for £200 million in 2001—it was profitable in the early years—and Dominic Chappell, who even Sir Philip in his ITV interview last week admitted had no retail experience, and was categorically the wrong buyer and the result of a horrid decision. In his powerful speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Richard Fuller) laid bare the consequences of the decision to sell to Dominic Chappell.

A key theme in the report is the stark contrast between the impact of BHS’s demise on workers and pensioners, and the payments received by senior executives in BHS and RAL and their advisers. The report also highlighted serious weaknesses, as has this debate, in the corporate governance of the companies concerned. The Government are very concerned about these issues.
The Prime Minister has already made it clear that we will review corporate governance, including further reforms on executive pay, as part of work to build an economy that works fairly for everybody, not just the privileged few, about whom we have heard so much this afternoon. Strong and transparent corporate governance is vital to provide trust in business and to foster good decision making by companies. The Government intend to consult later this autumn on options to strengthen the existing framework.

The hon. Member for Hartlepool made some salient points about the gap in governance between a public and a large private company. His Select Committee’s inquiry into corporate governance will provide an opportunity—

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank you for indulging me and hope you will excuse my possible ignorance of the parliamentary process, but I am somewhat confused by the Minister’s responding halfway through the debate, before all Members have had the opportunity to bring forward the concerns of their constituents.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Mrs Eleanor Laing): The hon. Lady has herself made clear in asking that question that she has not served for very long in this House, so no one would expect her to have a perfect knowledge of the parliamentary process, but I am somewhat confused by the Minister’s responding halfway through the debate, before all Members have had the opportunity to bring forward the concerns of their constituents.

Hannah Bardell: I sympathise with the strength of the argument that she has made. It is important that we have a debate that is open to all Members who wish to participate, and I hope that the Minister will allow that to happen.

Margot James: I sympathise with the strength of the hon. Lady’s argument. I assure her that we will consult widely on this matter, and I will ensure that the views of all Members are taken into account.

Ian Blackford: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Margot James: No, I am going to continue.

If we need to bring forward further legislation in light of all the evidence, including that emerging from the BHS investigation, we will do so. In the meantime, we must allow the independent regulator the time it needs to prepare any case and to follow the statutory process wherever it goes.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Margot James: I will, but, mindful of the fact that many Back-Bench Members want to enter the debate, only for one last time.

Jim McMahon: I appreciate that. A great deal has been made of the need to wait for the regulator to come to a conclusion, but this is also about leadership. Will the Government show some leadership and clearly put the BHS case to one side in light of all the evidence, including that emerging from the BHS investigation?

Margot James: I assure the House that investigations of the conduct of BHS directors and the management of the pension schemes are well under way. The accelerated Insolvency Service investigation of the activity of former BHS directors is ongoing. It is one of the biggest investigations ever undertaken by the agency, and the Government have made additional resources available to support what we regard as vital work. If evidence is uncovered that indicates that the standards of any of the directors’ conduct fell below what was to be expected, action will be taken. The Financial Reporting Council has announced an investigation of the audit by PricewaterhouseCoopers of BHS’s accounts for the year ending 30 August 2014, and the Serious Fraud Office is continuing to review material and liaise closely with the Pensions Regulator.

Margot James: I sympathise with the strength of the hon. Gentleman’s feeling, but certain legal aspects may or may not arise in future, so I must be a little guarded in what I say. I hope that he will forgive me for that.

Jim McMahon: I assure the House that investigations of the conduct of BHS directors and the management of the pension schemes are well under way. The accelerated Insolvency Service investigation of the activity of former BHS directors is ongoing. It is one of the biggest investigations ever undertaken by the agency, and the Government have made additional resources available to support what we regard as vital work. If evidence is uncovered that indicates that the standards of any of the directors’ conduct fell below what was to be expected, action will be taken. The Financial Reporting Council has announced an investigation of the audit by PricewaterhouseCoopers of BHS’s accounts for the year ending 30 August 2014, and the Serious Fraud Office is continuing to review material and liaise closely with the Pensions Regulator.
and the Insolvency Service to identify any information that gives rise to a reasonable suspicion of serious or complex fraud.

I understand that Members and the public are keen to see the outcome of the investigations, as indeed are the Government, but it is vital for the investigating bodies to be given time to examine, consider and compile the significant body of evidence. These are very complicated inquiries, given the number of investigations involved and the complexity of the documentation that is being received. I assure the House that, should the evidence support it in the end, there will be enforcement, and action of a tougher nature will be taken.

That is all that I propose to say this afternoon. I look forward to hearing the rest of the debate.

1.32 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I am proud to be a member of a Select Committee that was part of the joint Select Committee process that led to the reports that have brought us here today. I congratulate both Select Committee Chairs on their leadership over recent months, and on their excellent speeches today. I also commend the superb speeches that Conservative Members have made today. Ably assisted by our excellent staff, the Select Committees have conducted a robust, indeed truly forensic, inquiry into the BHS scandal, and I think that that has been good for the reputation of the House.

I do not have a cynical bone in my body, but even I am slightly taken aback by the fact that it was today’s debate on the Committees’ report that brought Sir Philip Green into the public eye again in the last week or two, most recently when he indicated that he was closer to making a settlement for BHS pensioners. I welcome that, but it does show that a report, and the impact on affairs such as those that we are considering.

I do not always agree with the new Prime Minister. However, when she was asked in a recent television interview, “What makes you angry?”, she was absolutely right to reply, “the powerful abusing their position.”

As we have heard from Members today, that should make us all angry. The sorry tale of British Home Stores is an exemplar: it is a tale of someone who accrued staggering personal wealth but then failed to meet his wider obligations to the company that had enriched him; a tale that ended with 11,000 jobs lost and 20,000 people—including my constituents and those of many other Members who are present—facing cuts amounting to, in extreme cases, up to three quarters of their pensions.

Some of those people were approaching pension age, and, in the last years of their working lives, were unable to take action to remedy the shortfall in their income. They still do not know how much money they will be able to draw on in order to pay their mortgages or rents and live out the rest of their lives. That is absolutely shocking. People deserve security in their retirement, and when they are let down we should be very concerned. As our report makes clear—this is something that I think gets lost—the pension contributions that companies make are not charitable donations; they are the means by which employers meet their deferred pay obligations, and it is those that have been breached.

I know that Sir Philip Green feels much maligned by the Committees’ investigation of the BHS sale, because he made that extremely clear when he was in front of us, but until and unless he provides proper redress for the pensioners, he has absolutely no right to do so. We have heard from many Members today about the scale of the enrichment and the extent to which the company was milked for dividends during its profitable years in the early part of the last decade. It is not for me to talk about how the company’s assets proved to be less robust than had been expected, or how profits taken in the good years left the company more exposed to the subsequent tougher climate, because that has been well done by others. What concerns me is what happened to the pension scheme after it moved from the surplus that it was in when the company was bought in 2000 to a deficit of £345 million in 2015 and £571 million by the time of its collapse.

What we know is that BHS and Sir Philip Green refused to make the employer contributions that were necessary to secure the sustainability of the pension scheme over the year, which caused concern to the board of trustees. Dr Margaret Downes told us that she was sufficiently worried about the declining state of the scheme during the second part of the last decade to seek assurances from the company about its long-term commitment to the scheme, including payment of the requisite contributions. The assurances were not given, and the contributions were not made.

In the summer, Sir Philip Green told our Committees that he had no involvement in the discussions about the pension scheme before 2012. He claimed to be unaware of the problem, and basically blamed the trustees. He suggested that they had made “stupid, stupid, idiotic mistakes”, and had been “asleep at the wheel” of the pension scheme. He indicated that he would have been willing to make much larger contributions had he only been aware of the growing deficit. Our Committees were deeply sceptical about those comments.

During the now infamous summer evidence session—I believe that it was later to become a surprise YouTube hit—we were asked to believe that someone who had a reputation for the micromanagement of BHS had known nothing whatsoever about the state of the pension fund. When he did find out, of course, he became actively involved in trying to do something about it, and at one stage, as we have heard, that led to a proposal for an unprecedented 23-year recovery programme based on a contribution that BHS saw fit to make rather than one driven by the needs of the trustees. That ended in the sale of BHS and its subsequent collapse, and it constituted a lack of due diligence that even those with absolutely no understanding of business will know to be truly shocking.

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): The hon. Lady mentions due diligence. When I attended the Committee sessions, it seemed as though the blind were leading the blind. This was bigger than just Green; the trustees’ lack of governance was extraordinary.

Ms Buck: The entire process of the lead-up to the sale to Retail Acquisitions Ltd, which involved a range of participants, was truly stunning in its lack of robust
I welcome to her place. She had a slightly different role for Westminster North (Ms Buck), a fellow member of the collapse of BHS, it is a pleasure to speak in the joint Committees that conducted the inquiry into the circumstances of the collapse of BHS were “a blight on the reputation of British business”. British business has much to be proud of. As we have already heard, we want to have an environment in which business flourishes and risks can be taken. I completely endorse that. Sometimes, there will be failures. Indeed, pension funds have gone into deficit in many cases —BHS was not alone in that regard—but British business needs to ensure, and be part of a process whereby, its reputation as a whole is not sullied by the shocking and cavalier behaviour of some of the outliers, whether in respect of employment law or the handling of pensions.

In the past few years, and particularly since the 2008 financial crash, we have seen shockwaves of anger and alienation throughout our political system. That has been the case in much of the developed world. There is a sense that the game is rigged and that the wealthy and powerful have their own rules and are not held to account, whether for incompetence, greed or, sometimes, worse. The 2008 crisis highlighted that sense, but it did not begin there and it did not end there. There must be consequences for this sort of behaviour, for the sake of the reputation of good business. There must be consequences, otherwise Government cannot look themselves in the face. They cannot be held in high regard if they do not hold people to account. Those consequences must be proportionate and achieved through due process, but they must be there. That has been excellently set out by my colleagues on the Select Committees. They have set out the changes that are necessary in the law, in corporate governance and in the process by which dividends are paid out when pension funds are in deficit.

The House must scrutinise all those measures and consider introducing them. However, there must be individual accountability. What I want to see more than anything—more than further damage to Sir Philip Green’s reputation, more than his humiliation, more than the removal of his knighthood—is the money. I want the damage that has been done to his reputation in the Select Committee process and in this debate finally to bring him to the table to do the right thing, so that he can hold his head up high, the pensioners can get the deal that they deserve, and all of us who have been engaged in the scrutiny of the sorry tale of BHS will know that that work has been vindicated.

1.42 pm

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): As a member of the joint Committees that conducted the inquiry into the collapse of BHS, it is a pleasure to speak in the debate. It is also a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck), a fellow member of the Committee, and my hon. Friend the Minister, whom I welcome to her place. She had a slightly different role beforehand—she was my Whip.

Before being elected to this place, I worked in business. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Richard Fuller), I am pro-business and pro-enterprise, but not at any cost. I have been appalled by the catalogue of events that led to the demise of BHS and by what we learnt in the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee about working practices at Sports Direct. Both are bad for business and, I am afraid, both are bad for the reputation of business, to pick up the point made by the hon. Member for Westminster North.

Rightly, reputable businesses have also been appalled by both situations. The irresponsible behaviours of a few endanger the reputations of the majority that operate responsibly. That is why I fully support the position of the Prime Minister and the Government that we need to make our economy work for everyone. As she said on the steps of Downing Street, “we’re the party of enterprise, but that does not mean we should be prepared to accept that “anything goes”.”

That is not, as I see it, an attack on business—far from it. There is a desire to protect the reputation of business. After all, we do not want to see the irresponsible behaviours of a few tarnishing the reputation of good business. We need to look only at the banking crisis and the resulting lack of trust in banks, from which, let us be honest, they are still trying to recover, to see the dangers of reputational damage resulting from such events.

Michelle Thomson: I rise to note something on the banking crisis and to refer to the Minister’s remarks earlier. Does the hon. Lady agree that, with issues such as the banking crisis and how the state deals with the continuing RBS saga concerning the Global Restructuring Group, how quickly and effectively agencies deal with the matters that we call out is pivotal?

Amanda Milling: The hon. Lady makes an interesting point. She has a lot of personal interest in looking at RBS and the banking industry. From my perspective, the Government have been very quick in responding to the collapse of BHS and in recognising that there is a need to review corporate governance. I will come on to that in a bit more detail shortly.

The devastating events that resulted in the tragic collapse of BHS raise several questions about whether the framework of corporate governance is satisfactory, especially in relation to large private businesses—those with large workforces and large pension liabilities. This is about protecting our economy, protecting the taxpayer from picking up the bill and, most important, our responsibility to do everything we can to protect employees.

Many right hon. and hon. Members have discussed the consequences of the collapse of BHS. They have looked at the employees and the members of the pension scheme. I would like to focus on the employees. Eleven thousand people lost their jobs as a result of the collapse of BHS. But for those people it was not just about losing their job; it was about the impact on their lives and that of their families. Many of those people have mortgages to pay and are worried about whether they can keep a roof over their head and that of their family.

Richard Fuller: May I echo what my hon. Friend is saying? My right hon. Friend the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills, who cannot be here today,
mentioned to me that the BHS store in his constituency was for many years one of the most profitable BHS stores, but no due regard was given to those employees or pensioners. They were essentially cast aside, as everyone else was. The impact is being felt throughout the country—in town after town, store after store.

**Amanda Milling:** I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He makes an important point. The stores are across the country. I do not have one in my constituency, but many right hon. and hon. Members do. Hundreds of people were employed at each store.

As I said, this is not just about the employees; it is also about their families. Far more people than the 11,000 employees have been affected by the collapse of BHS. As the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) mentioned, the effect has been devastating. This has been a horrid period for the people who no longer have jobs at BHS and are facing difficulties in finding new employment.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I agree with the case that the hon. Lady is making. Does she agree that not just the people in the stores who were directly employed by BHS, but the catering and cleaning staff and everyone in the supply chain will be adversely affected?

**Amanda Milling:** The hon. Lady makes an incredibly valuable point. It is about the supply chain. Recently, Rugeley B power station shut in my constituency. That affected not just the employees but the contractors and the wider supply chain. It had a real knock-on effect.

The joint Committees’ inquiry has highlighted that the events that led to the collapse of BHS suggest the need to review the regulation on corporate governance, particularly with regard to large private businesses. The inquiry has also suggested that there is a need to create a more level playing field between large private and publicly listed companies in terms of transparency and codes of conduct. As the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright), the Chair of the BIS Committee, has mentioned, it will be conducting an inquiry to look at corporate governance and the roles and responsibilities of directors, addressing the issues that have been highlighted in the BHS inquiry.

I am pleased that the Government are committed to reforming corporate governance. It is clear that we need to review the practices of large private businesses, the role of directors in decision making and the responsibilities of directors to consider how they protect the interests of their employees and the members of their pension schemes. Therefore, I welcome the Minister’s remarks and I hope that she and the Government will consider the inquiry’s observations and recommendations and the points made by right hon. and hon. Members this afternoon.

To conclude, we have a responsibility as policy and law makers to learn lessons from the collapse of BHS. I look forward to the Government publishing their consultation this autumn.

1.49 pm

**Dr Lisa Cameron** (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): I thank the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) for introducing this important debate and pay tribute to the cross-party Members involved in the Committee reports, including my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh West (Michelle Thomson).

In July of this year, the British Home Stores shop in my constituency closed. The long-standing store was the third largest retail unit in our East Kilbride Plaza mall. The store did avoid the first round of closures, but staff were left with huge uncertainty about what would happen in the interim, and it was eventually closed. That was a very sad day for staff and constituents. I have frequented the store since childhood and walking by the empty unit is still strange and a stark reminder to our community of the injustice that unfolded and the loss of jobs and pensions.

While our local staff oversaw the closure of our BHS, former owner Sir Philip Green reportedly continued his Mediterranean holiday aboard his £100 million superyacht. I understand that he owned BHS for 15 years before selling it to Dominic Chappell for £1 in 2015. Sir Philip Green has rightly come under fire for taking a massive more-than-£400 million in dividends from the department store chain and selling it in such a manner to a man without retail experience. A damning report from the Business, Innovation and Skills and the Work and Pensions Committees found that BHS was subject to systematic plunder by Green and Chappell and labelled Green the “unacceptable face of capitalism”.

These constituents of mine lost their jobs and pensions. The ordinary people are the losers. They gave their service and good faith both locally and to the company. So real questions must be answered by this House on multinational corporate governance structures and pension regulation. The UK Government must take action and not allow such situations to be repeated in the future.

We in this House must tackle asset stripping. The current situation does not protect working people—those who have families to look after, those who have people to care for and those who have done the right thing and have contributed to pensions and to society only to be taken advantage of and be failed. SNP MPs will work to strengthen the powers of the regulator, to ensure that the Philip Greens of the world are dealt with effectively when they seek to avoid pensions responsibilities.

There is a real need to address inequality and to work with businesses and industry to provide appropriate regulation. Many of my affected constituents have contacted me to ask that Sir Philip Green be stripped of his knighthood; his keeping the title adds salt to their wounds and the injustice of this situation.

**Margaret Ferrier:** Does my hon. Friend agree that, although Sir Philip deserves to be stripped of his knighthood, we also need to address the very real issue that exists: that of all the Philip Greens of the world being able to treat workers in this manner? They need to be made an example of by the Government.

**Dr Cameron:** I agree. Workplace regulations should be addressed.

A further matter to be addressed in terms of Sir Philip Green’s knighthood is whether his actions were honourable. Both I and my constituents say no.

I conclude by requesting that the House support the amendment and take appropriate action. We should demonstrate to the constituents of East Kilbride, Strathaven...
and Lesmahagow who have been so badly affected that we hear and heed their voices and fully support them at this devastating time.

1.54 pm

Michelle Thomson (Edinburgh West) (Ind): I would like to begin my contribution to this important debate by joining others in thanking the Chairs of the combined Select Committees and pointing out that any suggestion that their report was not a robust, detailed, evidence-led inquiry can be rebutted. It ran for months and had many sessions; the session with Sir Philip Green alone lasted for six hours.

I support the view that, from its initial purchase, Sir Philip saw the dash for cash from the business as the Green family’s primary purpose. Even in the early days, there was limited evidence of a successful retailer improving turnover or market share. I am sure other Members will continue to highlight the various ways that money was redeployed to the Green family, often away from the clutches of the UK taxman, such as by the payment of dividends and the treatment of various assets. I have no doubt that they were all entirely legal, but were they irreproachable?

We have heard much already about the nature of corporate governance. Our report describes it as having a variety of roles, including balancing “the interests of...many different stakeholders”.

We have also heard reference to the UK corporate governance code. It states that “one of the key roles for the board includes establishing the culture, values and ethics of the company.”

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): I thank my hon. Friend and all the members of both Committees. I had the pleasure of sitting in and listening to quite a lot of the interrogation and I thought it was first-class.

Despite the problems we have heard about, such as those to do with corporate architecture and regulation, does my hon. Friend agree that Adam Smith was right when he said we cannot divorce business practice from human behaviour, and that the problem here is that the human behaviour of Philip Green has undermined corporate governance and any possible culture?

Michelle Thomson: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. The code goes on to say in the sentence I was quoting:

“The directors should lead by example and ensure that good standards of behaviour permeate throughout all levels of the organisation.”

The code applies only to listed companies with a premium listing of equity shares, but that does not absolve a private owner from any responsibility. Time and again opportunities were missed to address the growing pension deficit and it cannot simply be argued that the deficit was a result of the global financial crisis and increased longevity. Sir Philip had accountability for addressing the deficit and could have chosen to do so on a number of occasions, as other schemes managed to do.

The QCs’ report cites many examples of the Green family’s legal rights as the majority shareholder, but says very little about the responsibilities to pensioners and employees that that brings. I am sorry, but Sir Philip cannot have it all his own way. It was a lack of judgment that allowed the pensions situation to continue, and a lack of judgment that progressed a sale to a wholly unsuitable third party.

The non-executive chairman was at pains to point out that the code does not apply to private companies, and the QCs’ report notes that the chair of the board has merely the same duties as the other directors. Legally that is true, but might I inquire as to what exactly the remuneration of £125,000 as chair of the board was for? I support the suggestion of the governing body for governance, the ICSA, which suggests reforming the code to include private companies. We have heard a number of calls for that today.

In terms of the general culture of organisations, there is always a key risk if a level of power is concentrated in just a few key individuals, there is weak leadership which chooses to surround itself with people who are reluctant to disagree for fear of falling out of favour, and there are cultural failings within the organisation that are common knowledge but remain unchallenged.

We all have a duty to speak out in these cases, because by remaining silent we become complicit in the contract of the bully and the bullied.

In the case of BHS, the final decision on sale was made without the non-exec chair asking about the credentials of the purchasing company, why it was believed to be the best outcome for the employees and pensioners, or whether the third party had a credible turnaround plan—and, incredibly, they were not invited to the ratification meeting. There was only one non-exec director at the meeting: the son-in-law of Sir Philip Green, whose stated brief was to represent the interests of Lady Green.

I challenged some board members to name a time—any time—when they successfully challenged Sir Philip Green. Their response was muted. I could literally count the seconds ticking by as each respondent looked for an example.

Our report notes that “absolute power, in business as in politics, is a dangerous thing”.

It was certainly absolute power that enabled Sir Philip and the Green family to run BHS as their personal fiefdom, to exclude independent directors from key decisions and to bully weak senior managers, and this contributed to the ultimate failure of BHS and to its ultimate failure in its duty of care to the pensioners and employees.

I shall finish by making a brief comment about the amendment. This UK legislature is already struggling to demonstrate its relevance to many people. It must be able to give a voice to people on the important issues of the day. The saga of BHS is being played out in the media, and not only recently. We have seen the success story, the “loadsamoney” parties, the knighthood, the record-breaking dividends, the decline and the eventual sale of the business. People watching at home have, with every justification, asked, “How can this be? How can an owner of a company act with such impunity in the matter of 11,000 jobs and 20,000 pensions?” Hindsight is a wonderful thing, and who among us does not recognise circumstances in which we would do things differently? I am sure Sir Philip Green regrets the
circumstances now, but we are talking about a knight of the realm, and that position must surely require a higher bar of ethical behaviour.

Joanna Cherry (Einquing South West) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Has she, like me, received dozens of emails from constituents who are concerned that Sir Philip Green should be held up as an example? I shall read out just one of the emails I have received.

“As someone in business, who takes pride in the efforts we make for our staff and customers, it’s really hard to understand why someone like Sir Philip would be allowed to retain his knighthood. Surely, we should not be placing such traits as aspirational for the public.”

Does she agree with that sentiment?

Michelle Thomson: I absolutely agree. Many of us will have received hundreds of letters and emails from our constituents on this subject.

It is on this point that the argument turns for me. The corporate governance code is not there to provide a loose set of rules that companies are invited to think about now and again. It is fundamentally a framework for behaviour in business. Business is not just about the bottom line; it is about providing jobs and sustaining communities, and the best businesses are based on partnership. Sir Philip Green knew for many years that BHS was in trouble and he failed to do the right thing. His actions, and his inaction, led directly to the loss of 11,000 jobs and affected the lives of 20,000 pensioners.

He seems to believe that BHS being a private company negated any accountability or responsibility for the lives of people who depended on him and, ironically, who made his success.

2.2 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is lovely to see you back in the Chair, Mr Deputy Speaker. I can advise you that I will not be as loud as I was last night.

I stand to contribute to this debate in unfortunate circumstances, in that, like many colleagues in the Chamber, I speak on behalf of a number of constituents who have been profoundly affected by the collapse of BHS through loss of employment and uncertainty over their pensions. Before I proceed, however, I would like to put on record my thanks to the Chairs of both Select Committees, particularly the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), who has had to undergo public vitriol from someone who clearly does not deserve a knighthood. He is to be commended and very much thanked. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh West (Michelle Thomson) for her determination to continue her work on the Select Committee.

My constituency was home to a BHS store in my hometown of Clydebank for nearly 40 years, and the day the store closed for good was the end of an era and a sad day not only for the community but, more critically, for those who had given loyal service to a company that did not value them in return. When the collapse of BHS became public and the announcement was made that stores, including the one in Clydebank, would be closing, I visited the store to offer my support and to hear the staff’s concerns for the future. As I am sure many Members will recognise, such visits are never a pleasant experience, and genuine concern was expressed about what the future held for them.

It was at that time that the true picture began to emerge of the handling of the BHS pension fund and of the existence of a massive deficit of nearly £500 million. For the staff who had contributed to the pension scheme and who had just found out that they were to lose their jobs, the bewilderment and shock that this situation had been allowed to occur was undeniable. This situation has filled me with anger over the injustice to all those who believed they had a secure future in older age, only to have it announced that they could lose up to 10% of their pension when reaching pensionable age.

I was heartened to hear in the House today that there might be some resolution in this regard, and I hope that it comes quickly. Nevertheless, it is completely unacceptable and a downright disgrace that the staff—the majority of whom, critically, are women—have found themselves in this predicament. I would go so far as to say that it has been nothing short of criminal. The professional and dignified manner in which the staff behaved stands in striking contrast to that of Mr Green and his dodgy cohort of warmeers, including the trustees, who are all culpable in this debacle. They should be ashamed of themselves for the manner in which they have behaved, but sadly I suspect that they are too busy quaffing their champagne and sailing to Monaco on their yachts to give a damn about the mess they have created.

I would like to take this opportunity to praise the store management in Clydebank, local organisations, the local authority—West Dunbartonshire Council—the Department for Work and Pensions and Scottish Government agencies such as Scottish Enterprise, which worked in concert to assist the staff when they found themselves seeking alternative employment.

I was informed recently that every member of staff who sought alternative employment was given the support and advice required to be successful in their application, which was a great relief to me and I am sure helped the staff and their families to sleep a little better. This is an example of all levels of government coming together and using whatever levers they had at their disposal to counter the adverse situations that our communities face. I am full of praise for the organisations that helped to deal with the impact and aftermath of the BHS debacle, but serious questions must be asked as to why this situation was allowed to unfold in the first place.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): My hon. Friend has encapsulated the human element of this situation fantastically well in his description of the people working for BHS. I commend him for that. I too had a BHS store in my constituency, and many staff members lost their jobs and had their pensions affected. Another aspect of this involves the buildings. Kilmarnock now has another building on its high street with a “To Let” sign on it. That affects the surrounding shops and the footfall to them. The effect on surrounding businesses is another consequence that has not been considered.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I agree with my hon. Friend that affects constituencies the length and breadth of the UK.

I would like to commend the recent joint report by the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee and the Work and Pensions Committee, which has looked into the Pension Protection Fund, pension regulation and the sale and acquisition of BHS. The report should make
uncomfortable reading for those involved in the governance of the company. On many occasions, I watched and listened to the Committees’ proceedings from the Public Gallery. The report must be acted upon by the Government, and I ask the Minister to confirm that this will happen as a matter of urgency. The Government must now show real leadership in tackling this problem. The laissez-faire policies of the UK Government must be consigned to the 19th century where they belong—along with Philip Green’s knighthood.

Words are no longer acceptable; action must be taken now or we will be in danger of more companies going the same way as BHS. That would have serious and profound consequences for our economy, which, due to the ongoing uncertainty over Brexit, is already under serious pressure and struggling to cope. Without action, the Philip Greens of this world will continue to undermine public confidence in private business and have a serious impact on private enterprise. Simon Walker, the director of the Institute of Directors, has stated:

“The reputation of corporate Britain has not recovered from the financial crisis and there are important questions that need to be addressed on issues including transparency, executive pay and board diversity.”

We cannot allow business to mess about with the people’s future income, and the UK Government must up their game on pension regulation, and indeed on pensions altogether—but that is for another debate entirely.

I very much welcome the announcement of a further inquiry by the Work and Pensions Committee, which will look at the adequacy of the Pensions Regulator’s power to deal with issues such as these and at how best they can be prevented from happening again. I fully support the strengthening of the regulator’s powers as a means of ensuring that no one is able to avoid their pension responsibilities, and I know that my Scottish National party colleagues and I will be working hard to make that a reality. I therefore await the Work and Pensions Committee report with great interest and hope that it concludes that the regulator should be in a strong position to protect employees from their rogue bosses.

Turning to the amendment calling for the Honours Forfeiture Committee to strip Philip Green of his knighthood, central to my constituent’s actions and also that the Government must get to grips with unscrupulous businesspeople to ensure that this does not occur again. I well understand the frustration and anger directed towards Philip Green. Indeed, I have already made my feelings towards this individual known during this debate, and it is right that we should seek to inform those with the authority to do so to strip him of his honour. Following my participation in the debate on the House of Lords debate last night, it should come as no surprise that I am no fan of an honours system.

Finally, we owe it to the British BHS workforce to hold Philip Green to his promise to resolve the deficit in the BHS pension fund. I am making a personal commitment to my constituents that I will not stop fighting for them until the matter has been resolved and they receive what they fully deserve.

2.10 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Having listened to colleagues and read the conclusions of the report by both the Work and Pensions and the Business, Innovation and Skills Committees, two principles come to mind that cut to the core of the debate. What we have seen from Sir Philip Green and the collapse of BHS is a lack of responsibility and, moreover, a lack of respect. I commend both Committees, their members and their staff for a comprehensive, factual and damning report on the fiasco of the BHS collapse. Mr Green lacked respect for BHS employees and their families when he mishandled the business to the point that it could only be sold for £1. He then abandoned all responsibility for their pensions and the failed company that fell apart under his leadership. The report makes for grim reading, particularly when it states that “the total dividends paid by BHS Ltd were £414 million in the 2002–04 period, almost double the after-tax profits of £208 million. BHS Group, the parent company, paid dividends of £423 million in this period... We were told that the Green family received £307 million of this. This effectively removed value from the company, precluding its use for purposes such as investment or pension contributions.”

Our constituents are bearing the brunt of that recklessness and greed. A constituent of mine, Tracey Hurst, reached out just yesterday to share the impact that the BHS collapse has had on her life. Having worked for BHS for 17 years, she remained there until it collapsed and closed completely. She refers to herself as a loyal member of staff who stayed until the very end. She was not bitter, but disappointed and concerned for her colleagues, many of whom have been unable to find new jobs. Another constituent, Laurence Robertson, contacted me to say that he feels strongly about such greed at the expense of the average person. Another constituent reached out to express how he and his family had always loved shopping at BHS but had been disgusted to discover what he called Sir Philip’s absolute greed and complete lack of compassion. Many have asked that Mr Green be stripped of his knighthood, which seems only fair given that many have been stripped of their jobs and pensions under his leadership.

Joanna Cherry: BHS was a much-loved institution on Edinburgh’s Princes Street for many years. I remember visiting it with my mum as a wee girl in the days when there was even a food hall, which was quite a long time ago. Does my hon. friend agree that this House owes it to the staff of BHS, who served their communities so loyally for many years, to ensure that sanctions are imposed for what occurred and that this cannot happen again?

Hannah Bardell: As ever, my hon. and learned Friend is absolutely spot on. A knighthood for thousands of pensions does not seem unreasonable. The 32 BHS stores that closed across Scotland included branches in Livingston, Hamilton, Kirkcaldy and Leith, and the closure resulted in more than 700 employees losing their jobs and livelihoods, and a place of work to which many, like my constituent Tracey, gave a huge chunk of their working lives.

When employees lose their jobs and pensions, their families are hit by that loss. Sir Philip understood the importance of providing financially for his family—he understood it very well. In fact, the entire Green family hugely benefited from BHS. Reports say that the Green family made around £2.7 billion in total out of BHS and Taveta. Mr Green paid substantial dividends offshore that financially benefited his wife. BHS employees want to be able to provide for their families, but Mr Green is clearly blind to the parallel. Sir Philip has done pretty
well out of BHS and other investments. He has a helicopter, a jet and three yachts. I have nothing against someone spending their hard-earned money as they please, but that should not come at the cost of our constituents’ pension pots. If Sir Philip’s responsibilities do not include ensuring that his employees receive what they have earned, they will certainly not be enjoying the same luxuries as he; they will not even have a pension to retire on.

Beyond responsibility and respect, Philip Green’s actions and those of Dominic Chappell and the BHS directors simply fly in the face of good business practice. BHS’s collapse, coming amid trade negotiations for Brexit, reflects the dire need to encourage fair and inclusive business practices across the UK. This debate is about not only placing blame on Sir Philip Green, but doing what is right for BHS employees, who have been cheated out of their jobs and pensions, and other future employees. It is about ensuring that there are fair business models and regulations so that such a collapse can never occur again.

The Work and Pensions Committee’s announcement that it will examine the adequacy of the Pensions Regulator’s power in a further inquiry is a constructive start to the mission. My SNP colleagues and I have called repeatedly for the establishment of an independent pensions commission so that we can create an architecture under which the Philip Greens of this world can no longer run away with people’s hard-earned money. Now that EU workers’ rights will no longer be guaranteed and transferred to UK workers, it is more important than ever that we are proactive and ensure that our constituents are treated fairly by their employers. As the UK Government embark upon Brexit negotiations, there may be no running commentary, but we can be sure that there are running and ongoing concerns. Employees will remain uncertain about their rights, and the Government have a duty of care to all workers, including those put out of a BHS job and pension.

The Prime Minister claims that she will ensure that workers’ rights continue to be guaranteed in law as long as she is Prime Minister. I say to her and her Government that we require rights to be guaranteed far beyond her term or any of this Government.

Alison Thewliss: My hon. Friend makes an excellent case. Would workers’ rights be enhanced if employees were allowed on company boards?

Hannah Bardell: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. The Prime Minister has mooted that idea and I hope that she receives the support of her party.

Returning briefly to Sir Philip, as he is for the time being, he has responded to the criticism that has been waged against him by saying that England “is a place where you get a lot of jealous, envious, you know, negative people.”

What a shoddy and shameful way to describe anyone, particularly when they are customers and consumers. I hope that Mr Green is listening when I say that my colleagues in the Chamber from England, Scotland and elsewhere in the UK are not jealous or envious of his gross mismanagement of BHS, but I think I am right to say on behalf of hon. Members from all parties that we do feel negative—negative about how hard Mr Green’s former employees, who are our constituents, will be hit by that mismanagement and his failure to make amends.

It all comes back to responsibility and respect. Sir Philip did not respect the hard work, loyalty and livelihoods of his employees, my constituents and the constituents of Members from across the Chamber. Just as a company is responsible for its employees, Parliament is responsible for its citizens. This is about responsible business practices and responsible regulatory practices. This is about holding businesses and individuals to account by any means possible and sending a strong, clear message that we will not accept such shoddy practices from our businesses towards our people.

Strip Philip Green of his knighthood. Take him to task. Maybe get him to sell a few of his superyachts so that my constituents and everyone else’s can get the pensions and retirement that they worked so hard for. We must have a proper, strong regulatory framework so that this dereliction of duty can never happen again.

2.19 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow so many great speakers. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) for his work and chairmanship of the Work and Pensions Committee in producing this joint report, alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright), whom I thank for his chairmanship of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee. I also thank those hon. Members who have contributed by serving under their leadership on both Select Committees to help to conduct this investigation of the handling and failing governance of BHS.

It was my privilege to be in the Public Gallery when Sir Philip Green was called to appear before the Committee. It was an education for me to witness at first hand his dismissive and belligerent attitude, variously referring to my hon. Friend the Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck) as “your Lady” and requesting that the hon. Member for Bedford (Richard Fuller) should “stop staring” at him. The title “Sir”, for those who choose to accept it, is bestowed upon those deemed to be deserving of the honour. With the title comes an expectation that a person will conduct themselves with respect and dignity, but that was sadly absent from Sir Philip’s performance on that day.

I would specifically like to concentrate on the BHS pension fund, rather than the possible stripping of Sir Philip Green’s knighthood. If he does lose his honorary title, I guess we will have to accept that it was an “honest mistake” to bestow the title upon him—unfortunately some honest mistakes, such as unloading BHS on to a serial bankrupt, are just bigger than others. Should Sir Philip be stripped of his knighthood, I suggest that, as a symbolic gesture, it is given to one of Sir Philip’s redundant employees. I would like to nominate Mr Grant Atterbury, who has chronicled the demise of BHS and his own experience of the shop floor in a series of very sad, funny, touching and eloquent articles via the pages of The Guardian. Mr Atterbury is still looking for work, and he writes:

“If anyone happens to know of any good jobs going that might suit a deeply cynical 43-year old whose key skills include folding towels and writing slightly bleak yet comical portraits of ramshackle department stores, do please get in touch.”
He lives in Kent, just in case any Member has a job that they might be interested in offering him. Let me return to pensions. I am pleased to hear that negotiations have started in order to find a solution to the pensions problems faced by those who worked at BHS, but I raise concerns about to the speed of and commitment to the process. Sir Philip has made a vow to “rescue the pension scheme”, but unfortunately, according to the Pensions Regulator, it has yet to receive a “credible” offer to implement a deal. The Pensions Minister said yesterday that neither he nor the Government have received a written offer, which leaves 20,000 pensioners still uncertain about their investment and future, and how they will survive in retirement.

The joint report states:

“Sir Philip Green systematically extracted hundreds of millions of pounds from BHS, paying very little tax and fantastically enriching himself and his family, leaving the company and its pension fund weakened to the point of the inevitable collapse of both.”

That is clearly unethical, immoral and in breach of section 172 of the Companies Act 2006, which states:

“A director of a company must act in the way he considers, in good faith, would be most likely to promote the success of the company for the benefit of its members as a whole, and in doing so have regard to—

(a) the likely consequences of any decision in the long term,
(b) the interests of the company’s employees”.

I think there is cross-party agreement that Sir Philip failed to meet any of those requirements on any level. We in the House have an obligation to make sure that the regulatory body ensures that that section of legislation is implemented and that law is carried out.

It is imperative that a deal can be done and that Sir Philip makes a credible offer as soon as possible. He is on record as saying he did “everything possible” to stop BHS from going under. He should now be doing everything possible to protect these families from the hardship that his mismanagement may have left them in. As we have heard, he left BHS with a £571 million pension deficit, paid very little tax and fantastically enriched himself and his family, leaving the company and its pension fund weakened to the point of the inevitable collapse of both.

Our first priority is to save the pension fund. As far as I am concerned Sir Philip Green can keep his honour, provided he pays back the pension deficit in full from his own ample wealth. He should make good his wrongs with deeds, not just the good intentions that he offered the Select Committee. But if all we do today is posture in condemnation of one man, we are doing little except indulging in competitive scapegoating. I am sure I speak for many people in this country when I say this: the most extraordinary thing about this whole affair is that legally, Sir Philip Green has done nothing wrong. Had he broken the law, and were he just a criminal, stripping him of his knighthood will not create jobs for the 11,000 who lost them. It will not fill the £571 million deficit in the pension fund. It will not fill the hole left on high streets up and down the country. It will not pay back the £6 million owed to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs. Nor will it ensure that firms in BHS’s supply chain, many of which are small businesses, the foundation stones of our economy, are paid what they are owed.

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Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): There have been a number of occasions when there have been similar incidents. Only about 12 months ago, nearly 1,000 jobs went at City Link on the outskirts of Coventry. I tried to get a ten-minute rule Bill through, and it was defeated. It is about time that we had some really tough legislation on these issues.

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Clive Lewis: I will address that point a little later in my speech. I think the Government have said that they intend to change their tune, and that they are now the party of the workers. We shall see whether they genuinely are, but I will not be holding my breath.

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Clive Lewis: I thank my hon. Friend for that comment—it is one that many of us on the Labour Benches agree with. We want to see action, not words. When scandals such as this break, we here cannot have it both ways. We must either shrug our shoulders and say, “Tough luck, guys, that’s the way the game works, you lose,” or say, “We will legislate to make sure that this never happens again.” Will we do that? Will we look at the role of the auditors who signed off on BHS as a “going concern” just a year before it was sold off for a £1 like a second-hand yo-yo? Will we look at the role of the huge city financial advisers who waved through the sale of BHS to Chappell, or at the pillaging of the pension scheme, that, let us remember, is not unique to British Home Stores? This is the story not of one bad apple spoiling everyone’s reputation, but of a system that is bent, and we know in whose favour.

Good businesses are the lifeblood of our economy, but, as honest, responsible, hard-working business people up and down the country know well, the system often allows good businesses to be undercut by bad businesses. When companies are used to extract wealth rather than to create it, it hurts everybody.

In the near future, the shape of the modern economy will be transformed. Let us make sure that that transformation is truly for the benefit of all and that we do not need to come back to the House again and again to express our outrage at yet another scandal and yet another rip-off of the ordinary people of this country. The rules of the game need changing.

I am delighted to see the cross-party condemnation of Sir Philip Green’s conduct. I am also delighted—if not more than a little surprised—to hear the Prime Minister claiming to have thrown out the laissez-faire fanaticism that has dominated her party’s thinking for the past 30 years. We on the Labour Benches welcome any move towards an economy founded on fairness and democracy. It is, after all, what our party has always stood for. It is not what the Conservative party has always stood for. Are we really to believe that the party of billionaires and tax avoiders is the one to transform our economy in the interests of fairness?

Let us take one example: the Prime Minister’s modest proposal to give workers a voice by allowing them representatives on boards. We welcome that suggestion. Giving workers a voice is what our party has always stood for, but I am not convinced that the proposal goes far enough. Are we to believe that an individual worker or two would have been able to stand up to the likes of Sir Philip Green? A voice is useless without teeth. However, even the Prime Minister’s own Cabinet will not support that modest proposal. Members of the Cabinet are, I surmise, more honest than the Prime Minister, more aware of which side their bread is buttered.

I hope that Sir Philip Green is better held to account as a result of today’s debate. I hope even more that it serves as a wake-up call on deeper problems and proves to be a turning point in how our economy is governed. I welcome the Prime Minister’s rhetorical conversion to our party’s values, but the question that she and other Conservative Members must answer is this: they have talked the talk, but can they walk the walk?

Frank Field: I have one message. Today, the House of Commons has illustrated to the country how we work: reports are commissioned, delivered and debated here. The message that we all want to go out is that merely producing a report is not the end of the tale. In many cases, we have to follow up the report. The message to those who have lost their jobs and whose pensions are uncertain is that this place will not give up until we gain the maximum justice that we can. As my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) has just said, there is a full agenda on how we reform pension law and company law, and we have already started that task.

Amendment agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House notes the recent joint Report by the Business, Innovation and Skills and the Work and Pensions Committees on BHS; endorses that Report’s criticisms of the governance of the company and of the holding company, Taveta Investments Limited; believes that the sale of the company to Retail Acquisitions Limited for £1 was clearly not in the interests of British Home Stores’ employees and pensioners; notes the failure of Sir Philip Green over many years to resolve the deficit in the BHS pension fund; and calls on him to fulfil his promise to do so forthwith; and, noting that Philip Green received his knighthood for his services for the retail industry, believes his actions raise the question of whether he should be allowed to continue as a holder of the honour and calls on the Honours Forfeiture Committee to recommend his knighthood be cancelled and annulled.
Industrial Strategy

2.36 pm

Chris White (Warwick and Leamington) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered industrial strategy.

May I thank what we call the BBC for approving my application for this debate? Let me also thank the hon. Members for Hove (Peter Kyle), for Edinburgh West (Michelle Thomson) and for Hartlepool (Mr Wright) for supporting this debate. We often debate policy in this Chamber, but it is rare for us to debate the creation of a new Department and what it will in fact mean.

In my maiden speech, I referred to my constituency, Warwick and Leamington, as being at the centre of the country, both geographically and demographically. We have good schools, colleges and two highly respected universities on our doorstep. We have many businesses, which are household names, a skilled workforce and low unemployment. The constituency has a strong reputation in the technology sector, particularly in the video games industry, and the wider region has a heritage firmly based in manufacturing.

This month, on a visit to my constituency, I was pleased to see the site that will house a new factory for Vitsoe, the furniture manufacturer and exporter. It is on the very spot that was home to the Ford foundry until it sadly closed in 2007.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman’s constituency is next to mine, and he will know that Jaguar Land Rover has its main development plant in Coventry, probably employing around 5,000 to 6,000 employees. Equally, he will also know that the Chinese have put more investment into the black cab company, which is constructing a new site in Coventry. That gives us a good demonstration of some of the industries that have been created in the Midlands.

Chris White: I welcome that intervention. The hon. Gentleman and I have attended some of those very interesting institutions and worked together at Warwick University, one of our leading international universities.

I am pleased that Tata has based its new technology centre in Leamington, which shows what effect inward investment can have on our constituencies and our country. Despite the collaboration—the links between our educational institutions and business, its location and its workforce—how much more could we do as a constituency and as a country if we had the strong foundations of an industrial strategy?

Since working in the automotive sector, I have always had a passion for manufacturing, not least as co-chair of the all-party manufacturing group. I am a member of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee—I am pleased to see its Chairman, the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright), in his seat—and we are currently taking evidence on this concept.

We have recently heard evidence from the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), the former Member for Twickenham and Lord Heseltine, who all assured us in their own different and special ways that we have had an industrial strategy all along. Perhaps they are right, but I would like to use this speech to say how I think an industrial strategy could be reformed to meet some of the present challenges that we face.

In the last Queen’s Speech debate, I spoke on industrial strategy. I remember that most of the other speakers spoke about sugar tax, an important issue at the time. I must admit that I was not entirely overwhelmed by the Government’s enthusiasm for what I was saying, so no one is more delighted than me to see the inclusion of the words “industrial strategy” in the name of a Department.

There has been a sense of scepticism about industrial strategy. [Interruption.] That was more warmth than I received for my remarks in the Queen’s Speech debate. Industrial strategy has been given negative connotations. Let us consider British economic performance, for example, in the post-war period. Britain’s relatively poor record between 1950 and 1979 has generally been blamed on the lack of competition, with traditional firms being unwilling to adopt technological or process advances. Wilson’s “white heat” of the scientific revolution was replaced by a heavy reliance on the financial sector. Neglect in the past has seen a weakening of our supply chains and a huge shortfall in the skills that a world-class industrial base requires to satisfy both demand and opportunity.

We need to have a strategy and structure in place, a need made even more urgent following the EU referendum. In addition, highly capital-intensive advanced manufacturing requires long-term planning. There is a burden on companies to invest in skills and equipment, and a burden on the state to help create stability for long-term decision making—macroeconomic, fiscal and regulatory.

For manufacturing to grow, an emphasis needs to be placed on encouraging investment and greater long-termism. Although initiatives such as the Midlands engine and the northern powerhouse are laudable, they need to be supported by strong tangible policy, and that policy will be less effective if it is piecemeal. For example, capital allowances were popular with industry, but were discrete in their design. A coherent strategy can work for the Midlands, the north and the south, driving growth, building economies and providing sustainable employment and the subsequent reduction in community and individual inequalities.

Any new industrial strategy must fit the times we live in, the domestic economy, the global marketplace and developing themes such as Industry 4.0. In September 1965, the then Secretary of State for Economic Affairs produced the national plan, which sought to cover “all aspects of the country’s economic development for the next five years”.

The plan was more than 450 pages long and looked at everything from the running costs of schools to the future development of the electronics industry. The plan was comprehensive in scope, but our economy no longer operates under such a structure and the plan would have negative consequences if replicated today.

The lack of success of documents such as the national plan does not mean that there should not be a national industrial strategy now for the UK, or that there is not a case for a coherent document to be drafted by the Government, outlining the support that they intend to give the sector and Departments. In countries such as Germany, long seen as a model industrialised nation, there has been little need for the Government to pin down formal strategies or statements because this
[Chris White]
philosophy is so entrenched and embedded in all activity. In Britain, there has been a tradition of volunteerism when it comes to economic organisation.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that in Germany, in the Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau—KfW—which has been in place since the late 1940s and provided long-term support to small and medium-sized enterprises, we have a model that could be replicated here, perhaps in the form of a UK investment and development bank?

Chris White: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution, but I gently suggest to him that that slightly misses the point. It is just one element of an industrial strategy.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Chris White: I would be delighted to give way, so long as the hon. Gentleman keeps to the subject.

Mr Sheerman: Is Germany the only model that the hon. Gentleman is examining? The challenge that we face, with only 10% of our people in the manufacturing workforce, is that with a smart bit of kit it is possible to manufacture anywhere in the world. That is a wonderful opportunity. Does he not think that Germany is an outdated model to follow?

Chris White: With the economic advances in our technology and with institutions such as the Warwick Manufacturing Group and other such groups, including in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency, we need to invest in research and development to make sure that we maintain the cutting edge and lead in those technologies.

Central Government, or perhaps more accurately Whitehall, generally responds well to objectives and targets, which provide focus and concentrate minds. A cohesive document would allow the public and business to hold the Government to account. Debate would be unavoidable and long-term consensus policy would prevail. The document, or statement, would lay out policies to support manufacturing for the medium-term—around 10 years, say—giving clear objectives for the economy.

Mark Tami (Alyn and Deeside) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that Governments have tended to intervene when a sector is failing, but they have failed to support a successful sector because we in this country step back and say, “Why should we support it? It’s doing fine on its own.”? Is that not one of the big problems that we have faced for many years?

Chris White: The Government should intervene before a sector is failing. We always seem to miss the problem when it occurs, which makes it much more difficult to resolve, not least in some of our strategic industries.

The Government need to state how they intend to achieve their objectives through a long-term framework. Although it is recognised that manufacturing does not make up the majority of the economy, it can be seen as a driver for other sectors in respect of efficiencies, processes, skills, exports and so on. It requires more explicit planning than other sectors, which can be seen as interdependent, with the state playing a more active role. This should not come, however, at the expense of creativity or productivity, and it should assist rather than hinder.

One of the most consistent calls from manufacturing has been for the Government to articulate a long-term commitment to the sector and to give an indication of the policy framework they are likely to operate in the medium-to-long term. That should be a rolling document, updated regularly and taking into account fluctuations in the wider global economy and in the sector in the UK. It should be debated in Parliament to provide transparency and accountability. It should address a wide range of challenges. How effective is the British Business Bank in terms of access to finance? What capital is required to radically change manufacturers’ investment decisions? Can incentives be created to encourage business to invest? What progress is being made with green manufacturing?

Education is a vital component of the strategy. There is currently little planning associated with supporting the development of STEM subjects—science, technology, engineering and maths—in primary education, which is a major factor in creating the skills gap the industry is now experiencing. Those subjects are the bedrock of degrees and apprenticeships, but they are left to the latter stages of education—often too late to influence a child’s decision-making process.

Mr Sheerman: Does the hon. Gentleman know that tens of thousands of young people in further education colleges up and down our land are desperate to get into apprenticeships, but they cannot, because they cannot get their GCSEs in English and maths? When will the Government introduce a practical maths GCSE to unblock that blockage? Will he persuade them to do that?

Chris White: I will leave the Minister to answer that question in his remarks.

In a truly global trading nation, more provision should be made for studying languages. What is the number of children at school studying Chinese or Russian? How can it be improved? A welcome manifesto commitment—the hon. Gentleman has touched on this—was to increase the number of apprenticeships to 3 million by 2020. How are we going to take down the barriers that prevent that from happening?

Infrastructure is an essential part of the strategy, not least in improving the quality and reliability of supply chains. That should include the comprehensive development of a digital infrastructure that is fit for purpose. Other elements of the strategy would, of course, include an energy policy; procurement, immigration, export—including the role of supporting bodies such as UK Trade & Investment—catapult centres, research and development, through-life engineering services and the wider contribution from Whitehall.

Social enterprises may not be the first issue that springs to mind in this context, but they are a sizeable part of our economy. The positive impact social enterprises have on local communities is of huge value, and it is through an inclusive approach to shaping our industrial strategy that such sectors can be supported.
George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman way?

Chris White: I am sorry; I will not give way again.

Clearly, an industrial strategy needs to establish a framework—from how many children are studying STEM subjects at primary school, right through the industrially strategic pipeline to how many businesses are exporting. Where have targets been met, and where is further intervention required? As the strategy becomes more embedded, those things will not come as shocks, but more as minor adjustments to the levers of policy. We used to say quite a lot about the long-term economic plan. We need an economic plan, and underneath any economic plan, we need a strong and robust industrial strategy.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. May I suggest to Members that if we work around eight minutes, everybody will get the same?

2.52 pm

Mr Iain Wright (Bedford) (Lab): Thank you for that guidance, Mr Deputy Speaker—I need to have a productivity improvement of about 20% immediately.

It is a real honour to follow the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White). I think we have exactly the same principles, motivations and objectives when it comes to having an industrial policy. He is a fantastic member of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee. I thank him, other members of the Committee, and the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this important topic to be debated today.

I welcome the Prime Minister’s rhetoric about having a “proper” industrial strategy. We on the Committee have embarked on an inquiry into industrial strategy to assist with the development of policy. A number of fundamental questions need to be addressed to ensure that we have a modern, competitive, productive, sustainable and profitable business base in this country. What is the correct and optimum level of state intervention in economic and business policy? It would be ludicrous and naive to suggest that the Government do not intervene every single day through legislation and regulation that affect society?

Mr Wright: We can have many debates on industrial policy—we have and we will.

The hon. Gentleman touches on the second big theme of my speech, which is: What do we mean by picking winners? Let me go back to the notion of long-term business considerations and wishes for policy stability at the expense of short-term political culture. We have seen this already with the new Government. The new Prime Minister has announced that we need to have “a proper industrial strategy”. In doing so, she seems to have jettisoned much of what has gone before. In a letter to me this week, the Secretary of State said that there needs to be “a much stronger relationship between Government and business. For that reason, now is not the time for the Government to set out its approach in detail”.

Although that provides clear blue water between the current Government and what went before when David Cameron was Prime Minister, it hardly provides the reassurance of certainty for business. At a time when the process of Brexit is leaving business with unprecedented uncertainty and giving pause to future inward investment into this country, greater detail should have been provided. It is a cause for concern that over three months after the new Department was formed, the Secretary of State is still insisting that he cannot set out the Government’s industrial strategy in any kind of detail. Equally, important steps on large strategic matters such as airport expansion and new energy generation are taking far too long, especially when Britain needs to demonstrate to the world that we remain open for business.

Another key principle of what we need for a successful industrial strategy is effective cross-Government co-ordination. Industrial strategy will be a failure if it merely resides in No. 1 Victoria Street. As previous Administrations have demonstrated, unless the relevant Department—the Business Department, the DTI, or whatever it is called—is headed by a big beast, whether a Heseltine or a Mandelson, the notion of effective co-ordination across Whitehall turns into dust. Only signs from the new Administration are encouraging. Most importantly, the new Cabinet Committee on Economy and Industrial Strategy is chaired by the Prime Minister herself. This should ensure co-ordination and effective leverage from No. 10 and demonstrate to other Departments that the Prime Minister is very interested in this issue and will be pushing to bang heads together if they do not demonstrate due respect to an industrial strategy.

That said, the Cabinet Committee still has to combat a silo-based and defensive approach from Departments. I think that the Secretary of State recognises that. As he said in his letter to me, “to be successful, the industrial strategy will need to deliver an upgrade to our infrastructure”. 

Richard Fuller (Bedford) (Con): The hon. Gentleman talks about the importance of the long term as he yet again stumbles into the same mistake that politicians make generation after generation—believing that they know what industrial strategy is but do not bother to ask their colleague for whom it might be something different. My experience of business has been in technology. The only long-term thing in technology was the knowledge that tomorrow will be different from today. How on earth are the Government, with their lumbering, slow way of manoeuvring, supposed to keep up with the entrepreneurs who have created so much progress in society?

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and yet the Treasury will not relinquish control over infrastructure spend. He also stated that a successful industrial strategy will need to “improve our education and training system to provide the skilled workforce that will be needed in the future”, and yet the Department has lost control over skills policy. Lord Heseltine, giving evidence to our Committee last week, said that “industrial strategy starts in primary schools”, and yet when we met the Permanent Secretary this week and asked, “To what extent does BEIS have influence over the design of primary school policy in order to link it with industrial policy?”, he conceded that the Department had no such influence. I am yet to be convinced, based on experience of successive Governments, and having had the privilege of serving as a Minister myself, that Whitehall Departments will have as a primary objective the effective implementation of an industrial strategy. I hope that the Minister can demonstrate otherwise.

A further key way in which effective Government co-ordination can be demonstrated is through smart procurement. There may often be a tension between Departments in securing goods and services at the cheapest cost, and in considering the use of British-based and British-made products, which may sometimes be more expensive. I would contend, however, that it is often a false economy to buy off the shelf from overseas at the long-term expense of an effective British manufacturing sector. This month’s announcement that the hulls of the replacement Trident submarines are to be built with French steel, at a time when the British steel industry has been pushed to the brink of extinction, shows vividly an acute failure of industrial policy. I am not for one moment endorsing the idea of protectionism. That approach insulates domestic companies from the harsh realities of having to compete in the global economy on cost, innovation and quality, and it ultimately dooms them to obsolescence. However, given the great success story of many parts of British manufacturing, why is not every single public organisation’s fleet using Nissan cars built in Sunderland or Vauxhall vans built in Luton? Why is the procurement process nurturing British industry, and how will a proper industrial strategy ensure that that becomes the case?

Richard Fuller: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I welcome that approach. One of Britain’s virtues is its openness and the fact that that openness lends itself to dynamism and a willingness to consider new ideas and innovate new products. That ultimately leads to better competitiveness, yet there is a risk that this country will sell off the crown jewels, which would be detrimental to the long-term success of British business. We are at the heart of a dynamic and connected global economy, but we are at greater risk of investment in capital allocation decisions that affect British industry being made far away from these shores by parent boards headquartered overseas.

Indeed, within days of the Prime Minister entering No. 10, it was announced that SoftBank was buying Cambridge-based Arm Holdings for £24 billion. That was not an old-fashioned, obsolete, loss-making business, and it did not require a bail-out from the state. It was a successful British company in the growing global tech revolution. If the tests for stepping in to defend a sector that is important for Britain were not at work in that instance, it is difficult to see when they would be applied. Indeed, what would those tests be? For every instance of a welcome takeover, such as Tata’s purchase of Jaguar Land Rover, there are numerous examples of takeovers where industrial capacity was moved offshore, such as Kraft’s takeover of Cadbury. What are the criteria for stepping in and intervening?

Mr Sheerman: That is music to my ears. When I was a young man, I worked for Imperial Chemical Industries. These days it is called Syngenta and it has a big plant in my constituency. The leading agritech company in the world was taken over, including all its sites, not by a normal company, but by ChemChina, which is a part of the communist Government of China. That is not a normal takeover, but what are this Government doing about it? I have not heard anything.

Mr Wright: That is a fair point and it gets to the heart of what we mean by foreign takeovers and their link to industrial strategy.

I am conscious that colleagues want to make their own speeches, so I will finish. The Government have yet to articulate what is meant by picking winners, whether they be individual companies, sectors or technologies. There seems to be a move away from our previous sectoral approach, but there is no clarity with regard to the criteria. It is increasingly obvious that the Government are not entirely clear about what an industrial strategy looks like. Starting with a blank piece of paper gives the Select Committee a welcome opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the development of policy, but it does not provide much reassurance or certainty to the firms that are working hard to create wealth and prosperity for this country—and certainty is what they are crying out for at the moment.

3.4 pm

Stephen Hammond (Wimbledon) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright). For a long time, the words “industrial strategy” struck fear into the heart, and raised the hackles, of many on the right of the political spectrum. Those words called to mind the era of excessive government intervention and anti-market philosophy, with the Government picking winners—usually
winners that were declining—deciding on nationally strategic industries, and pursuing anti-competitive practices and industrial relations policies that stilled competition.

**Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab):** When it comes to industry, the most interventionist Government in Europe is Germany. It is also the most successful economy in Europe.

**Stephen Hammond:** That very much depends on how we define intervention; we might come on to that later in the debate.

To meet the challenges of the 21st century, especially in post-Brexit Britain, industrial strategy should be about four things: the Government creating the ecosystem or the environment in which industry can succeed and in which national productivity—a huge challenge—can be increased; ensuring that our country has the skills that it needs; ensuring access to finance; and boosting and promoting industries of competitive and comparative advantage.

When we talk about the ecosystem or environment, we almost inevitably talk about infrastructure. One of the achievements of the previous Government was that even in a time when we had to pay down the deficit, infrastructure was reckoned to be the key factor for economic growth. Public sector support has, rightly, been provided for all sorts of developments over the past few years, most notably in transport, energy, housing and broadband communications. The National Infrastructure Commission, which made it possible to look across sectors and move away from the previous silo approach, has had a great impact.

As the hon. Member for Hartlepool pointed out, an urgent priority for the Government has to be a consideration of not only how we strategically assess, but how we deliver. That is partly about smart procurement and making the Government an intelligent client. Our inability over the years to specify design has meant that costs have inevitably increased, so the cost base and project management costs have been much higher than they would otherwise have been. The Treasury optimism bias or risk quotient, depending on what one calls it, has had to be increased throughout. By driving into the Infrastructure and Projects Authority some of the skills needed for the delivery of smart procurement, we will be able to reduce costs and make projects more attractive and fundable.

We need to get the private sector much more involved than it has been so far. If we travel anywhere else in the world, we will use roads and bridges that are privately owned and run, and the fact that they are privately owned and run does not make them any less useful. A commitment to infrastructure must be a cornerstone of any modern industrial strategy, and preferably a Member of this House rather than the other place.

Our departure from the European Union will give us a couple of fortuitous possibilities in what some of us think will be a difficult time. The EU procurement rules are some of the most onerous and bureaucratic anywhere in the world. Getting rid of them from our procurement system will undoubtedly help small industry and the supply chain. State aid has been a way of thwarting, as well as supporting, a lot of investment, and we will no longer have to abide by all the state aid rules. I hope that the Minister will say later that he accepts that challenge.

**Andrew Bingham (High Peak) (Con):** I have an example in my constituency of state aid preventing development. That development would help companies, and if we can do so, they will grow and create jobs upon jobs. The current situation seems ludicrous and we would be well rid of it, in my view. Does my hon. Friend agree?

**Stephen Hammond:** There will be some real opportunities. We will have the chance to re-examine our regulatory regime and competition policy to ensure that the UK is at the forefront of not only oversight, but competition.

If the movement of labour is restricted, there will be an acute skills shortage in this country, so we urgently need to look at ways of curing that. The Government have been at the forefront of one of such initiative, namely specialist academies for major infrastructure projects that allow us to build some of the skills that we have lost, but we need to do more. The Crossrail tunnelling academy is a prime example, and several other major rail projects are establishing academies alongside their projects. We would do well to continue to push that forward.

The recent Institution of Civil Engineers “State of the Nation 2016: Devolution” report recommends the creation of regional pipelines for infrastructure to identify where opportunities exist so that industry and academic institutions can invest in the training required.

In the longer term, there are two things the Government should urgently study and consider. The first is giving 14 to 18-year-olds an understanding of the fact that academic skills are not the only requirement for success in life, and that other things should be set alongside such skills. Why not have a national vocational qualification, alongside GCSEs and A-levels, to attract people into engineering? Equally, it would be perfectly possible for the Government to set up outreach projects that go beyond the theoretical and teach the application of STEM subjects.

Secondly, on finance, I hope the Minister will take the opportunity of our being rid of the state aid rules to consider some of the possibilities open to us. Almost inevitably, sovereign debt is chosen as the way to fund projects, because the weighted average cost of capital is cheaper. However, many countries look at possibilities in the private sector, such as pension funds, venture capital and sovereign wealth funds. The UK still seems to be suspicious of such funding. We should encourage the UK pension industry and other industries to set up direct investment funds. Equally, with the new freedoms they will have, the Government should explore setting up regional infrastructure and industry bonds, or regional equity schemes. This could be the new popular capitalism—the Mayism of the new century, just as popular capitalism was the Thatcherism of the 1980s. That will mean that people can invest in their country and region, and invest in their country’s success.

**George Kerevan:** The Scottish Government have already set up a Scottish investment bank, managed by Scottish Enterprise, which has significantly increased equity investment in small businesses.
Stephen Hammond: I am delighted to hear that. I am sure that the Scottish Government will want to take the opportunity of raising a sovereign wealth bond as well.

George Kerevan indicated assent.

Stephen Hammond: I see that the hon. Gentleman agrees. My point is that we could now do this regionally, probably by using local enterprise partnerships as a delivery mechanism.

With any infrastructure policy, there is the challenge of what the Government need to do to organise the machinery of government that will support it. The National Infrastructure Commission represents a great strategic advantage to this country. The Minister has already heard me talk about the need to ensure that the IPA delivers on making the Government a smart client. Equally, the Government should look at the machinery in place and then sweat that machinery to ensure industrial success. Many of the LEPs can play a role in helping with regional skills and financing.

Finally, many incubators have already been set up in universities, which is fabulous. My hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White) mentioned the one in his constituency, and there are others around the country, such as the agri-corridor in East Anglia, and particularly those in Cambridge, Leeds and Manchester, and across the north. However, we now want accelerators, which are for the next stage up. Businesses that have been in an incubator and have received some support are sometimes left to drift, and that is where universities can play a big role by bringing forward accelerators to help those businesses to reach the next phase of growth. We have talked a lot about picking winners, and if I had not spoken for longer than my eight minutes, I would have said much more about that. The Government need to ensure that universities focus those accelerators on our areas of comparative advantage. I know that the Minister—wearing not only the business hat he has on this afternoon, but his universities hat—will make that point to them. I am grateful for the opportunity to have spoken in the debate.

3.13 pm

Michelle Thomson (Edinburgh West) (Ind): I certainly look forward to hearing other contributions to this debate and to taking part in the Business, Enterprise and Industrial Strategy Committee’s inquiry on this important area.

In October 2015, in light of problems with the UK steel industry, I asked the then Minister if she regretted the Government’s lack of an industrial strategy. She said, “You could have had all the strategies in the world and it wouldn’t have made any difference.” I guess we can add this to the list of topics on which the new Prime Minister and the right hon. Member for Broxtowe (Anna Soubry) disagree.

I welcome the Prime Minister’s decision to implement an industrial strategy and to recognise that the fact that that is difficult does not mean we should not bother trying. A coherent and forward-thinking industrial strategy can set the foundations for economic growth and improve productivity, but only if it is done properly.

This debate will be full of questions. We need to ask what sort of industrial strategy the country requires, what the Government’s most effective levers are for improving economic growth and productivity, where Government intervention can have the biggest benefit for research and innovation, when we should get out of the way of business and when we should get involved. We also need to consider timescales, as we have heard. When can we realistically expect a White Paper or Green Paper on the industrial strategy? Will it be by early next year? We need to bear in mind that, even if we get full realisation by the end of the first quarter of next year, that will be only three years before the next general election. I reflect on the comments of the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright) that Governments have been consistently making policy and then moving away from it with the fashion of the time. Industrial strategy will be even more of a challenge, given the all-consuming task of co-ordinating Brexit at the same time.

Although we do not yet have a White Paper, we have had speeches and letters from the Secretary of State setting out some of the areas that the industrial strategy needs to cover. He has noted the need for a long-term sustained approach to policy making, as well as the development of an enduring policy framework that provides a stable and predictable environment for business.

In principle, I do not disagree. Many businesses in my constituency and beyond made long-term investment plans on the assumption that they would have unfettered access to the largest market in the world—one that is right on their doorstep. They therefore would, I am sure, appreciate knowing sooner rather than later whether their rights to trade in Europe will be equal to those of their competitors. That point was highlighted really clearly by the Japanese Government, who said:

“Uncertainty is a major concern for an economy.”

They went on to note that Japanese businesses had “invested actively in the UK, which was seen to be a gateway to Europe.”

Investor certainty is vital. The Brexit vote has shown how incredibly difficult it is to implement a long-term strategy that is resilient enough to withstand the change in fortunes of Ministers and Governments. A focus on evidence-led policy making could provide some ballast against the constant upheaval that exists in a parliamentary democracy.

Even when there is evidence in favour of a policy, however, more needs to be done to ensure that it is, in fact, implemented. Look at airport expansion in the south-east of England. We know there is evidence that that needs to happen to support businesses right across the UK. We have research on the costs and benefits, and several options are on the table, yet we still do not have a decision on which runway to build or extend. The link between timescales, vital infrastructure and decision making needs to be recognised. We know that the decision is being delayed for political reasons. This is a prime example of political priorities getting in the way of sensible industrial policy. We could also mention here the Green Investment Bank, which is based in my constituency of Edinburgh West. As soon as it made a profit, plans were made to sell it to the private sector. Those examples do not demonstrate a long-term, sustained approach to policy making, so I hope that they are considered when the strategy is put together.
The Secretary of State has also highlighted the need to build on and reinforce the UK's existing industrial strengths while developing a local approach to strategy—noble sentiments indeed. Given that stated commitment to localism and desire to build on existing areas of strength, perhaps he will look again at some of the mistakes made by his predecessors in government. I and many others were disappointed to see funding to reduce carbon emissions and tackle climate change scrapped or reduced by the previous Chancellor. Whether we look at the cancellation of the proposed carbon capture and storage plant in Peterhead, the cuts to efficiency schemes or the withdrawal of support for onshore wind generation, we see that the Government have demonstrated neither a local approach nor a desire to build on one of Scotland's undoubted economic strengths.

That disregard for local and long-term policy considerations and the failure to support national and regional economic strengths have had a major impact on the Scottish Government's attempts to harness the country's natural advantages, in turn putting at risk plans to reach a target of generating 100% of Scottish energy needs from renewables by 2020. A milestone was reached this year when, for one full day, 100% of Scotland's energy needs were met by renewable power. That was an exciting glimpse into a possible future that could be supported by a sensible industrial strategy from the UK Government.

Another example of short-term politics taking priority over economic needs was the cancellation of the popular post-study work visa in Scotland. This was a highly popular route for overseas graduates from Scottish universities to stay in the country. Many of the people who obtained this visa contributed a great deal to the Scottish economy and wider society. Universities Scotland conservatively estimated that Scotland lost out on at least £254 million pounds of revenue between 2012 and 2015 as a direct result of scrapping this visa route.

Scottish politicians in this Chamber have repeatedly declared that they would like more control over immigration policy in Scotland and the return of the post-study work visa. Scotland has shown its commitment to helping those in need by finding homes for a third of all Syrian refugees who have settled in the UK in the past 12 months. The long-term economic benefits of such a policy are obvious; the political will exists and the local need is there.

Finally, I just want to touch on the idea, also suggested by the Minister, of an upgrade in corporate governance. During our previous debate about BHS and Sir Philip Green, the topic of corporate governance was brought up several times. For too long, the focus of corporate governance has been on financial profit without any reflection of ethical values. Professor Christopher Hodges of Oxford University has led thinking about how improved corporate governance can lead to more ethical business practices and move everything forward.

To sum up, there is often a tension at the heart of industrial strategy between horizontal policies, which cut across all sectors, and vertical policies that focus on specific sectors. Prioritising specific sectors can see wider industry suffer, and if no sectors are focused on at all, the strategy runs the risk of being unfocused and unsuccessful. In evidence submitted to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, the Korean technology company Samsung said:

"In a fast-moving digital economy, the Government should not seek to direct or manage innovation, but instead should seek to create the conditions which promote innovation."

If all other sensible ideas fall foul of political pressures, I hope that this one principle will remain.

On balance, I welcome the Government's commitment to an industrial strategy, I hope it will not only lead to greater economic growth and productivity, but rectify some of the mistakes of the previous Government.

3.22 pm

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): It is with considerable trepidation that I rise to speak in a debate led by my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White). The last time I did so, I think I persuaded the Government to accept only the first clause of his three-clause social value Bill, but he kindly asked me to serve on the Bill Committee, by which time the civil service had vastly expanded it into something of a Christmas tree Bill. I very much hope that on this occasion there will be a different outcome, but it was of course a great pleasure to serve on that Committee.

Competition on the merits is a perfectly reasonable industrial strategy for the Government to adopt. It is the one that creates the most wealth and it has been proven to lift people out of poverty. I encourage any Member and anyone listening to have a look at the website HumanProgress.org and its Twitter feed for bite-sized snippets that illustrate just how well entrepreneurship, strong property rights and freedom to contract in a market economy not only facilitate production but engage other social forces that are healthy. It is social co-operation through the mechanism of competition in the market. Other mechanisms have always brought about poverty and misery. The goal of the Government's domestic policy should be to lower anti-competitive market distortions, and it is on that concept that I wish to focus my remarks.

Anti-competitive market distortions adversely affect economies and contribute to high costs. If we reduce distortions in both the UK and the world we could, according to the Legatum Institute's productivity simulator, see a significant increase in productivity and public welfare. One of the great problems with domestic suggestions is that they increase the level of ACMDs, which can lead to higher costs and push more people into poverty.

I would like to offer a taxonomy of ACMDs from a paper in the competition law journal, *Concurrences*—No. 4 of 2014—entitled, "The effect of anticompetitive market distortions (ACMDs) on global markets" by Singham et al. The authors classify those distortions into six areas, and I offer them not as a menu from which interventionists might pluck their preferred action, but as a description of areas in which Governments take policy choices that push people into poverty by prejudicing competition.

The first and most obvious is the type I distortion, described as

"government laws, regulations or practices that eliminate competition completely. Examples might include a local content regulation that eliminates foreign production from competition, or a capital adequacy regulation set so high that some banks are forced to exit the market."

That produces monopoly or oligopoly.
Type 2 distortions are
“government laws, regulations or practices that lessen competition. These are laws, regulations or practices that make markets less competitive, but do not necessarily foreclose competitors from the market entirely.”

Those distortions
“elevate the costs of certain companies.”

George Kerevan: I thank my colleague on the Treasury Committee for giving way. Does he accept that there is a middle way whereby Government can encourage competition, as we have seen with the superb Catapult centres, which are an example of an industrial strategy that works? By offering prizes for competitive solutions to technical problems, it is possible to create the ecology that the hon. Gentleman seeks.

Mr Baker: Well of course, the great prize in a free market should be a profit, which one is allowed to keep and invest in further production. I do not wish to bore the hon. Gentleman or the House, but by the time I get to point 5, he will see that I will turn to competition authorities.

I was saying that type 2 distortions that lessen competition create dead-weight costs in the economy. Examples would include distribution laws that increase costs for certain suppliers. Types 2a and 2b can be split up—[Interruption]—but I shall not go through them all. The hon. Gentleman has generously indicated that reading from this fascinating paper is perhaps not the most engaging speech for him, so I shall cut some of it down.

Type 3 distortions
“apply different rules to different firms”.

One would have thought that in a society governed by the rule of law, no one would stoop so low, yet they do. Other countries around the world—particularly, I am afraid, India and the Philippines—have such regulations.

Type 4 distortions
“are largely caused by state-owned enterprises”, which include “government privileges in licensing” and distortions relating to the pricing practices of state-owned enterprises and to “abuse of regulatory process”; while type 5 are
“largely due to action or inaction by competition agencies”.

I will happily share with the hon. Gentleman some of the detail on how competition authorities, either by acts of omission or commission, fail properly to promote competition.

Type 6 distortions are
“caused by anticompetitive state aid or support” whereby firms are given “subsidies and other subventions that may or may not be anticompetitive”.

The point is that it is now well known in academic literature that various categories of Government interventions make us poorer. They can be subjected to a taxonomy, and their costs can be estimated—

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I declare an interest in that I have worked for a competition regulator, Ofcom. The hon. Gentleman is suggesting that a lack of competition is always the fault of the Government, either by doing or not doing something. Does he not recognise that it is possible—indeed, it is what the literature shows—that companies acting in monopolistic ways or capturing markets are themselves responsible for a lack of competition?

George Kerevan: He’s read his Adam Smith.

Mr Baker: I have; I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, my colleague on the Treasury Committee, for saying that. I absolutely have, but perhaps not the same extent that he has. I certainly cannot quote the passage that I know he has in mind.

I say to the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central that I certainly did not suggest that a lack of competition is due only to the Government. I think she has applied her own ideas about what I stand for in order to come to that conclusion. I shall certainly read Hansard very closely tomorrow to see whether I suggested that. What I am suggesting is that in a taxonomy of six different categories of anti-competitive market distortion set out in a serious journal of competition law, two sub-categories of one category relate to mistakes that can provably be seen to be made by competition authorities. They are not perfect; no human institution is perfect, including competition authorities.

We are undergoing a process of becoming more open to trade, as indeed we should—seeking comparative advantage, seeking to supply new markets, and seeking to buy from new markets in order to drive down prices. However, the experience of trade negotiators whom I have consulted is that if we go and talk to nations in which the largest segment of the economy is agriculture, we find that we cannot do a deal with them if we take agriculture off the table. Why? Because of the extent to which we subsidise it. We must ensure that agriculture is well looked after, within the expectations that the Government have set; we must ensure we can continue to supply food. What we must not do, though, is try to negotiate with other nations if we ourselves are substantially distorting our own domestic markets in such a way that they cannot hope to compete with us.

I want to impress on the Government—there is substantial literature about this issue—that it is conceivable that both domestic and global productivity could be radically improved for the long term by means of a productivity and consumer welfare Act, which would entrench the very best of competition policy in British law in order to eliminate anti-competitive market distortion.

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): It is good to serve under your chairmanship again, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is also good to follow the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), because his was a very different speech from the one that I intend to make. I hope that the two will prove complementary in some way.

I begin by thanking the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White). It was good of him to initiate the debate, and very generous of him to invite me to co-sponsor it and accompany him to the Backbench Business Committee to make the pitch for it. It is
extremely timely, and his opening speech served the tone of the ensuing discussion very well indeed.

“Industrial strategy” is a contested term, and one with which some Members on both sides of the House struggle, because almost every post-war Government who have tried to implement such a strategy have come up against one difficulty or another. However, I think it is quite simple if we focus on the strategy side of what needs to be delivered and what business needs. That is the bit that many businesses want the most, and it is the bit that the Government, in various different ways, have often failed to deliver.

“Strategy” means, quite simply, identifying with clarity where we are, spelling out with clarity where we want to go, and being aware of the bridge that links the two together. If the hon. Member for Bedford (Richard Fuller) were still in the Chamber, he would, I hope, have noticed that I did not use the words “long term”. In fact, it is always a mistake to spell out exactly how long a journey of this kind will take, because different parts of the strategy will take different periods of time.

Business needs clarity and consistency. I think the House will be informed if I give two examples from Governments—not just this Government but a previous one as well—that involve both clarity and consistency. Sadly, they are not good examples from which we can learn, but examples that we need to avoid in the future. I begin, unfortunately, with a contemporary example. In the past week, members of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee have received a letter from the Secretary of State for BIS. I apologise to the Minister; I still call it BIS, because I think the new title, BEIS, sounds a bit like a kitchenware product. At the moment it seems like a gadget that does something with a wet lettuce, but we will see how it goes.

This is what the Secretary of State wrote in his letter about the industrial strategy that he would unfold and lead:

“Many of the key components of our industrial strategy will not be about particular industries or sectors, but will be cross-cutting. It will be relevant to people and businesses across the UK—for people as consumers and employees, and for businesses as investors and drivers of growth. It will also respond to and seize the opportunities presented by the transformations we are faced with in 2016—both domestically in our exit from the European Union, and in wider global trends.”

I am sorry, Minister, but that is a mission statement. It is not a strategy. It encompasses consumers and domestic, nationwide, international and global businesses. There will be a strategy for every aspect of business. Every business—from the self-employed right the way up—will be encompassed in one strategy. The Minister is nodding to say that it will be delivered; I think it will be wonderful, and I look forward to seeing how all that can be encompassed in one strategy. I support the notion of an industrial strategy, and I hope that it can be delivered.

However, from that starting point, I start to have sympathy with the scepticism of the hon. Member for Bedford. I would never have imagined that.

I turn to the position of the last few Governments. The industrial partnership approach was introduced by Vince Cable in 2014 when he was Secretary of State. In 2014, his Department in the coalition Government introduced—I quote from the website at the time: “An industrial partnership” that

“brings together employers across an industry sector to lead the development of skills, with a focus on growth and competitiveness. There are currently 8 partnerships covering the aerospace, automotive, creative, nuclear, digital, energy & efficiency, science and tunnelling (construction) industries.”

It went on to say that all those partnerships would be “funded up to March 2017”.

Unfortunately, the funding for that programme was cut in September 2015. Not six months after Vince Cable left office, the funding for the flagship industrial strategy of that time was cut.

Just last week, I received a response to a parliamentary question. The question was:

“To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, what role Industrial Partnerships will play in delivering the Government’s Industrial Strategy.”

The response was:

“The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy indicated that it will not be possible to answer this question within the usual time period.”

That non-answer says more than many of the real answers that I have had from the Department. It is not prepared to implement the strategy as we see it at the moment. We do not know what the strategy is, or how it will go forward. We do not even know whether any strands of previous strategies will be taken forward.

What does that mean to businesses on the frontline? In the past two years, we have had a clear sectoral approach to business strategy by one Secretary of State, but six months later it was changed by a Government who had no industrial strategy and refused to use the words “industrial strategy”. Now we have a Department with “Industrial Strategy” in the name. That is all over two years. Businesses are having to respond to that profound change in a rapid space of time.

Mr Baker: Along with anti-competitive market distortion, regime uncertainty is a problem. Exactly the phenomenon that the hon. Gentleman outlines causes businesses to make less profit than they otherwise would. I am sure that he would agree that it would be better if the Government did less.

Peter Kyle: I am sure the hon. Gentleman would agree that we would both want the Government to do more of the right things. So why do I not have a stab at spelling out what the right things are? There needs to be a focus on what businesses that create growth and quality jobs and generate tax want. What do they need in order to support their business? Many do not need any help from Government, but all are affected by Government policy in one way or another, because every business uses this country’s infrastructure, whether that be the internet, the roads or other transport networks. Government policy has an impact on businesses, whatever those businesses are. Getting the strategy right and listening to the voice of business as that infrastructure unfolds is at the core of how we can go forward.

What do businesses want from Government? The one thing that links all the things they want—we could go through many of the issues that are mentioned to us by businesses and industry groups that helpfully contact us, such as the EEF—is skills. It is good to have the Skills Minister here responding on behalf of a Department that—
The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): Universities Minister.

Peter Kyle: I beg the Minister’s pardon. I apologise. I am grateful that the Minister is here. He is split between Departments and can perhaps answer on this cross-cutting part of his brief. Skills are the issue that one comes across from every business. Unfortunately, responsibility has moved from the Business Department to Education. Is it conceivable that that could mean that business will have a louder voice in the House as the skills agenda unfolds over time? I think it is inconceivable.

What can Government do that businesses cannot do? There are—and I hope this answers the point made by the hon. Member for Wycombe—some things Government can do that others cannot. How can the Government inspire, encourage or enable businesses of the future? First, through infrastructure. Secondly, let us look back to 2000, when Tony Blair and Bill Clinton, via video link, together announced the mapping of the human genome. That was achieved by two Governments working together on a scale that no individual business could match, and certainly never without a patent. All the innovation that has spread from that single gesture by two Governments has spawned many industries since in academia and the private sector—for instance, in pharmaceuticals—and medical advances.

Those are the types of things that businesses need to be looking to. Government can do those things as part of a strategy, and I look forward to the Minister responding accordingly.

3.40 pm

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Joseph Johnson): By speaking relatively early in the debate rather than at the end, I want to signal that the Government do not intend at this stage to have the last word on the country’s industrial strategy. Such plans, which must command the support of successive Administrations, must be built on strong foundations of engagement, discussion and careful consultation across the Government and, indeed, across the country. As has been said, they should not be imposed from 1 Victoria Street or, indeed, anywhere else in Whitehall.

The industrial strategy is under development, as hon. Members have observed, so now is not the time to set out detailed plans for our approach. We expect to publish a discussion paper around the time of the autumn statement and then a response from the Government in the new year, 2017.

Mr Iain Wright: When?

Joseph Johnson: In the new year.

Mr Wright: And the paper?

Joseph Johnson: At the autumn statement this year.

Let me give Members a broad overview of the context in which we are developing the industrial strategy and a flavour for some of the principles guiding us as we do so. First, however, I want to thank my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White) and the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Michelle Thomson)—who is no longer in her place—and for Hartlepool (Mr Wright) for securing the debate and making such powerful contributions.

The UK economy has delivered a huge amount of growth and employment over recent years. Unemployment has been reduced from 8% in 2010 to 5% now, while full-time employment has climbed from 70% to 74% over the same period—faster than growth in France, Germany or the USA. But, as the Prime Minister has made clear, our economy is not working perfectly. Gains are not always shared across the country and too many people are losing out. We want to deliver an economy that works for everyone.

George Kerevan: Will the Minister add to that catalogue of statistics that exports have flatlined for the past five years?

Joseph Johnson: Our export performance is one of the features of our economy that we are seeking to improve through our industrial strategy, and I am looking forward to explaining a bit more about how we will do that.

The UK has the second lowest productivity in the G7, a fifth below the G7 average, and closing just half that gap would add £250 billion to the economy by 2025. A proper industrial strategy can play a key role in that, by delivering real benefits to the work and lives of businesses, consumers and employees.

Kelvin Hopkins: I, too, am concerned about our low productivity. Does the Minister not accept that a factor in that is cheap labour? If wages are low, that does not encourage companies to invest and become more efficient. We have a history of driving down wages or keeping them too low.

Joseph Johnson: Wages by and large correspond to the value added per hour worked that a company is willing to pay for. What is important is that we increase the average skills level in our workforce, so that we have a skills base that is globally competitive and able to command the wages in a market economy that we want people to have.

When Governments fail to look ahead and make the right long-term decisions on fundamentals such as tax, infrastructure, research, education and skills, they are abdicating responsibility. Such plans require us to take not a partisan approach but one that seeks to establish common ground. I am delighted that so many Members from all parts of the House have participated in the debate today, and I thank them for doing so.

I want to say a bit more about the principles guiding our approach to industrial strategy. The first thing to say is that developing a proper strategy takes time. It is not something that we can drop out overnight. We need to engage with a wide range of organisations and people to design and deliver a strategy that can have a real and lasting impact. That means engaging with Members, including through the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee’s welcome inquiry on industrial strategy. It also means spending time over the coming months engaging with businesses of all sizes and sectors, investors, local leaders and consumers, so that we can reflect their views and build on their knowledge and experience.

Our industrial strategy will necessarily be wide ranging, but that should not be at the expense of clear focus, so I would like to say a few words about where we will be
concentrating our efforts. First, building on proven strengths is a cornerstone of good strategy, and as many Members have observed, this country has no shortage of them. For a start, let us acknowledge our powerful record on science and innovation. Only America, with a population nearly five times our own, has more of the world’s top universities, Nobel prizes and registered patents. The UK has the most productive science base in the G7 and has overtaken the US to rank first among comparable major research nations for field-weighted citation impact, a key measure of research quality. This is hugely important. Science, research and innovation are essential to our future and must be at the core of any effective strategy for the long term.

Joseph Johnson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his observations. I will take a look at the statistics that he mentions. The car industry is just one example of advanced manufacturing in which we excel at the moment.

Mr Baker: I hope that the Minister will join me in celebrating this country’s excellence in not only manufacturing, but research in Formula 1. We have a number of teams in the UK. We are also the world’s second biggest aerospace manufacturer after the mighty United States. We do tremendously well, and Opposition Members are far too downbeat.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I welcome interventions, but when Members see the speaking time drop down to five minutes, they will understand, won’t they?

Joseph Johnson: Another globally competitive sector is satellite technology, with a quarter of all satellites launched into space currently being made in Stevenage.

Science and advanced manufacturing are, of course, not the only examples of excellence. We can point to other parts of our economy such as financial services, accountancy, law, consulting and creative industries that also set the global standard. We have worked hard over the years to make Britain one of the best places in the world to start and grow a business. We are creating a business environment that supports growth, by encouraging long-term investment and a dynamic economy with open and competitive markets. That has included backing industries like the automotive businesses by cutting corporation tax to 17% by 2020, slashing red tape by a further £10 billion and making major investment in the UK’s research infrastructure.

We have a strong base to build from. The question is how we can make the most of it, but we are not starting from scratch. Previous industrial strategies have seen success in particular sectors. Our challenge now is both to build on our competitive advantage and to identify and support the sectors that can drive future growth. This is not about picking winners, which hon. Members have urged against, nor about propping up failing industries or bringing old companies back from the dead. We must be open and ready for new competitors and open to welcome new disruptive industries that may not exist anywhere today but that will shape our future lives. It is about identifying industries that are of strategic value to our economy and supporting and promoting them through policies for trade, tax, infrastructure, skills, training and R and D.

It is hugely important that we take a local approach to strategy. Governments are fond of quoting national figures—I have already quoted some myself—on economic growth, productivity and employment, but the truth is that economic growth does not exist in the abstract; it happens in particular places when a business is set up, takes on more people or expands its production. The places...
in which businesses operate are a big part of determining how well they can do. We must recognise the strengths of areas across the country, including the midlands engine and the northern powerhouse. We have a strong framework in place to do that, such as through local enterprise partnerships or, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Stephen Hammond), our network of universities and our enterprise zones.

Through our science and innovation audits across the UK, led by local areas, we are mapping research and innovation strengths and infrastructure to identify and build on areas of greatest potential in every region. Such strengths are too often overlooked outside the golden triangle of London, Cambridge and Oxford. Through our catapults, the sectoral centres of excellence based across the country, we are supporting innovation where UK businesses have the potential to be world leading and to address local disparities in productivity.

Helping all parts of the country contribute to national success is key to our planning and a cornerstone of our approach. What is needed in each place is different and our strategy must reflect that. That is why many of the policies and decisions that form our industrial strategy will be not about particular industries or sectors, but cross-cutting. For us to succeed in the future, we need to have the right infrastructure—roads, rail, broadband and mobile—to connect businesses to their workforce. New infrastructure such as Crossrail is about to open, but we still have bottlenecks of roads, overcrowded trains, and broadband and mobile coverage that needs upgrading.

We also need to upgrade our skills base. We need a rising generation of young people who are not only better educated than those of our competitors and their predecessors, but also better trained.

On schools, we have announced £67 million for the next five years to recruit and train an extra 2,500 maths and physics teachers, and to upskill 15,000 existing maths and physics teachers. We need to make sure that vocational education, especially in engineering and technology, plays a much more prominent role in our country than it has for many years now. We also need a modern system of corporate governance, too. The Prime Minister has also already made it clear that we will look at that area, including further reforms on executive pay, as part of the Government’s work to build an economy that works fairly for everyone, not just the privileged few.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): I ask Members to take up to seven minutes, to try to get everybody in equally.

3.55 pm

Kelvin Hopkins (Luton North) (Lab): I am pleased to participate in this important debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White), not only on securing it, but on what he said, which was excellent.

British industry has suffered for too long from neglect and diminution, and I am pleased that the Prime Minister has chosen to reintroduce the term “industrial strategy”, one that I cannot recall being advanced by our political leaders for a very long time. She has also suggested that the state must have a role in promoting and managing our economy, and ensuring that it is healthy and strong and will serve the citizens well. The state cannot simply stand idly by and let the markets do their worst, and I am pleased that an era when that was too often the case now seems to be coming to an end.

I have differences with the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker), whom I admire and like in many ways, as I am a statist and he is not. Some 18 years ago, I tried to press the new Labour Government to intervene—to consider intervention—but my plea fell on deaf ears and I was told by a humorous Back-Bench comrade that that sounded too much like socialism. Governments of all colours since the 1970s have allowed much of our manufacturing sector to wither and reduce. We still have some fine manufacturing, as the Minister has said, but the whole sector is too small and cannot produce enough to bring any kind of sensible and sustainable balance to our economy. We have allowed an enormous trade deficit to emerge, above all in manufacturing, and primarily with the European Union. The pound has been grossly and persistently overvalued, above all against the euro, and has been a prime cause of our manufacturing weakness. We now, at last, have some relief, with the depreciation of sterling since the referendum, and already the economy is beginning to benefit. I look forward to renewed growth in our manufacturing industries and to our trade deficit reducing.

Lord Mervyn King, the former Governor of the Bank of England, said this month that Britain was borrowing 5% to 6% of GDP a year simply to buy imports and live beyond its means—this prosperity was an illusion borrowed from the future, fine for people who wanted to buy a Mercedes-Benz or have a holiday in Spain, but doing nothing for British industry. Professor Ashoka Mody, the former deputy director for Europe at the International Monetary Fund, has said:

“The idea that Britain is in crisis or is on its knees before the exchange rate vigilantes is ridiculous”.

He also said:

“The UK economy is rebalancing amazingly well.”

We should all welcome more of that.

Manufacturing based in Britain has bright prospects, provided the exchange rate is kept at a sensible level; exports will rise and import substitution will see domestic sales of UK products booming. There will probably be a J-curve effect at first, until goods already committed diminish and quantitative effects take hold, but that will not be long in coming. I have already suggested to some of our motor manufacturers that they would now do well to expand their supply chains in Britain and reduce their proportion of imported components. I am convinced that the motoring sector will be doing brilliantly in future years if they do that. We should not forget that Britain is a massive market, to which our own producers should be supplying more.

I want, however, to press the Government further in a virtuous direction regarding our industries. I urge the Government to give serious thought to recreating the National Economic Development Council—Neddy—and the little Neddes for the various industrial sectors. That was an agent of what was then called “indicative planning”, bringing together representatives of business, Government
and trade unions. The NEDC was hardly socialism, set up as it was by Edward Heath’s Government, but it did valuable work and could do so again.

There is much more we need to do to make our industrial strategy a long-term success, but an appropriate exchange rate is a vital if not sufficient condition for success. On that score, let me say just one more thing: the euro is proving to be a disaster, particularly for southern Europe. Its future is, thank goodness, now in serious doubt, with Italy in crisis, along with Greece and others. I believe the euro is actually the Deutschmark in disguise, with a number of weaker currencies bolted to it, holding down its value at a falsely low level. That is not only crippling for those weaker economies, but disadvantageous for us. It will be better for those European economies, as well as ourselves, when national currencies are re-established and are allowed to move to appropriate parities. The end of the euro would be good news for us all and, especially, for Britain’s industries.

Finally, let me say that outside the EU we will be free to use smart procurement to benefit British industries and to use state aids as we see fit. If that is protection, I welcome it.

3.59 pm

Mr Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White) on securing this important debate on a key aspect of the Government’s policy programme. I begin by welcoming the creation of a new Cabinet Committee on industrial strategy, which will put science, technology, innovation and exports at the heart of the Government’s agenda. I also welcome the Secretary of State’s speech at the Royal Society in July in which he committed to supporting new technologies and new industries as a key part of this new industrial strategy.

My argument is that only by embracing the fourth industrial revolution as part of the industrial strategy can we truly achieve our potential as an industrial power in the 21st century. This fourth industrial revolution—the unprecedented fusion of technologies that blurs the traditional boundaries between the physical, digital and biological spheres—is already transforming industrialised economies around the world, including our own.

That revolution is now accelerating and leading to breakthroughs and new products in fields such as artificial intelligence, advanced robotics and the internet of things. I am talking about driverless cars, drones, 3-D printers and nanotechnology to name but a few. They have already captured the imagination of the British public and now the attention of our policymakers. Mastering and leading the fourth industrial revolution should be at the heart of the new industrial strategy for our own country. What is clear from the experiences of other nations is that countries that are best able to take advantage of this new revolution are those with nimble economies, supportive Governments, low taxes and a competitive regulatory regime.

I am pleased that the Minister has confirmed that the Government will continue to focus on pro-enterprise and pro-innovation policies, which make Britain a world leader when it comes to starting and growing a business and exporting to the world.

I wish to offer three suggestions to the Minister and his colleagues as they develop our new industrial strategy for this century. First, the economic benefits of the fourth industrial revolution must be shared throughout the country, including in places such as Havant, and not just concentrated in London. Regional investment funds for 4IR technologies should be made available to promote regional growth hubs that stimulate growth and innovation outside the M25. I see local enterprise partnerships as a key partner, building on the success of the Government’s catapult centres, which the Minister mentioned in his remarks.

I very much welcomed the Chancellor’s announcement in Birmingham a few weeks ago that an additional £100 million will be made available to extend the biomedical catalyst and that there will be an extra £120 million for universities across Britain to fund new tech transfer offices. Those are welcome and forward steps. Research UK and Innovate UK—both Government-backed bodies—should also continue to ensure that their work and funding are truly national.

Secondly, the Government should use their procurement power to buy British when it comes to 4IR products. Other advanced economies such as Israel already play a key role in helping new sectors and new industries to develop, and our Government should do the same. The news that our Ministry of Defence has launched a new £300 million fund to promote defence innovation is therefore very welcome and a good example for other Departments to follow.

Finally, Britain must continue to invest in digital infrastructure, which is as essential to our future economy as railways were in the age of steam. This should include a new phase of the fibre-optic broadband roll-out, and 5G mobile internet.

I have put my thoughts in a new paper, which I have written with the free enterprise group of MPs and which is backed by the Institute of Economic Affairs. I look forward to sharing it with the Minister just before the autumn statement, and hope that he will come back to me on it.

In the meantime, I hope that the Minister will agree that, as the fourth industrial revolution gathers pace, we should embrace it and encourage it as part of our new industrial strategy. Throughout our history, Britain has adopted a pro-innovation and entrepreneurial approach to technological development. From farming mechanisation to domestic labour-saving devices, we have never allowed our fears about the future to hold back our economic or social progress. We soon realised, for example, the folly of requiring early cars to be preceded by a man carrying a red flag. We must adopt the same forward-thinking approach when it comes to the fourth industrial revolution and our new industrial strategy. Just as happened in centuries gone by, this new wave of technology can certainly bring about substantial benefits, from greater productivity, new jobs and lower production costs to more choice for consumers through new goods and services. If we deliver all those things as part of our new industrial strategy—more jobs, more productivity, lower production costs and more choice—we will certainly have delivered an economy and a country that works for everybody.
Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): It is somewhat ironic that we discuss industrial strategy following a debate on the scandal and tragedy of the collapse of BHS, especially given that one of the Government’s emerging pillars for their industrial strategy is:

“New corporate governance structures, including consumer and employee representation on boards, and greater transparency around executive pay”.

It is a shame that the Government’s industrial strategy was not in place before Philip Green got his grubby mitts on BHS.

The Government’s plans for a strategy come as we face a post-Brexit prospect of being out of Europe and out of the single market. The uncertainty caused by the UK’s decision to leave the EU and the Tories’ lack of a Brexit plan seriously damage the long-term planning capacity of firms and the UK’s trade outlook.

When one tries to ascertain what exactly the UK Government’s industrial strategy is, it appears that one needs to be a sleuth, as even the Library research team were challenged. Its debate pack, which is excellent as usual, states:

“This note brings together the limited information that has been published since Theresa May became Prime Minister which provides clues as to the how the Government’s industrial strategy will operate.”

We have limited information and only a few clues, but I am sure that between us we can cobble something together!

We know of some of the terrible failings of the Prime Minister’s predecessor. He and his Cabinet presided over a complete failure of long-term strategic planning, which has only perpetuated the productivity slump in the UK economy and low wage growth, and increased social, regional and gender inequalities. On an output per worker basis, UK productivity is 20% below the average of the other G7 countries, as the Minister mentioned. UK workers have suffered the biggest fall in real wages among leading OECD countries between 2007 and 2015, with their wages dropping by a shocking 10.4%. That is a terrifying statistic, given that our society are welcomed and included in our workforce. We need to be seriously more ambitious about a diverse workforce. In March this year the Equality and Human Rights Commission published a damning report which said that women were being held back by the old boys’ network. It stated, as the BBC reported, that “nearly a third of the UK’s biggest companies largely rely on personal networks to identify new board members”, and that “most roles are not advertised”.

An EHRC commissioner was quoted as saying: “Our top boards still remain blatantly male and white”.

The study, which looked at appointment practices in the UK’s largest 350 firms, which make up the FTSE 100 and FTSE 250, found that more than 60% had not met a voluntary target of 25% female board members.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): On that point, does my hon. Friend agree that the studies that came out recently about the motherhood penalty are particularly concerning, and something the Government need to tackle as soon as possible?

Hannah Bardell: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. These issues transcend party politics, and I know the Conservatives are doing their best, but, unfortunately, it is just not good enough, because in 2012-13 and 2013-14—the period of the study—fewer than half of the companies increased their female board representation. The Equality and Human Rights Commission said the problem was particularly acute with executive roles, where nearly three quarters of FTSE 100 companies, and 90% of FTSE 250 companies, had no female executives at all on their boards during the time covered by the study. Despite the fact that there are no longer any all-male boards in the UK’s FTSE 100 companies, the Equality and Human Rights Commission said very clearly that the “headline progress” of Britain’s biggest companies was “masking the reality”. Closing the gender pay gap, at which Scotland is already outperforming the UK, should also be a key priority.

Skills and innovation must be at the heart of the UK Government’s approach to industrial strategy. A statement released by the Prime Minister on 18 July outlined that apprenticeships and skills will now be the jurisdiction of the Department for Education. The new Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy deals with business, industrial strategy, science, innovation, energy and climate change. I and others fear that removing
apprenticeships and skills from matters of industrial strategy as part of that shift may lead the Government to lose focus on the skills agenda. We look for certainty that that will not happen.

We have seen a strong focus on those areas in Scotland as a result of the Scottish Government’s labour market strategy, which will provide up to half a million pounds to support the fair work convention; double the number of accredited living wage employers from 500 to 1,000 by next autumn; and provide £200,000 to businesses in the Community. The strategy also encourages innovative ideas about how to bring business and Government together to form a fairer, more inclusive society.

On the subject of employee participation in industry, I welcome the remarks the Prime Minister made when launching her campaign to be Conservative party leader about putting employees on company boards. I hope she honours that commitment. I am a big supporter of employee contributions to company decisions, and particularly of co-operatives. Having spoken previously about the benefits of co-operatives not just to their businesses but to the engagement and success of employees themselves, I hope the Minister intends to follow through on that promise. Will he also look specifically at the apprenticeship levy and its application to co-operative companies? I have spoken to a number of companies, including companies such as John Lewis, that are concerned they are being treated unfairly under the apprenticeship levy.

At this early stage, while the strategy is still being formed, let us remember what truly drives a fair and productive industry: investing in a diverse, skilled workforce, from apprenticeship to pension; working together with business, local and international; and encouraging innovation from the bottom of the workforce to the top executives. The Government need to get a grip.

4.13 pm

Amanda Milling (Cannock Chase) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White) on securing this afternoon’s debate. I would like to focus my contribution on one of the points the Minister made—the role of local bodies in the delivery of industrial strategy at a regional level.

The Government’s focus on industrial strategy, and their continued support for regional development in areas outside London, are welcome news in my constituency. The timing is also incredibly pertinent. The closure of Rugeley B power station in the summer was a real blow to the workforce and the community. It was a real turning point; for decades, Rugeley has had an economy based on the energy industry, being home to mines and power stations. For a long time, that was the main source of employment. The closure of Rugeley B is the end of that industrial heritage, and the question I am regularly asked is, “What next for Rugeley’s economy? What next for the next generation?”

The closure of the mines and Rugeley A power station saw the creation of industrial estates, business parks and housing, and the area is home to one of Amazon’s fulfilment centres. However, the redevelopment of the Rugeley B site presents a real opportunity to develop a strategic vision that creates a long-term sustainable local economy in Rugeley that creates skilled jobs and opportunities.

In creating a strategy for Rugeley, we need to consider other land sites that will become available for development in the coming years, including the site that is currently home to JCB Cab Systems and the land that could be developed once the flood defence scheme has been completed. In short, there is a need, and a real opportunity, to create a more strategic plan for Rugeley. I am calling on all the relevant bodies, including Cannock Chase District Council, Staffordshire County Council and the two local enterprise partnerships, to look at the Rugeley B site, not just in isolation but in the context of other land sites. The vision needs to be ambitious and strategic, taking account of the growth in new industries and technologies, and sectors of growth. There is a great danger that we fall into a trap of just doing “more of the same”. This is where the Government’s industrial strategy can help us scope an exciting new vision for Rugeley.

My hon. Friend the Minister referred to innovation. Rugeley was at the heart of innovation in the energy industry. I have mentioned before in the House that the four cooling towers are in two different colours of brick because people were trying to decide which was the most likely to blend into the countryside; they failed completely. Rugeley is ideally placed to home new industries, including digital and technology industries, given the infrastructure that already exists. Indeed, there is a connectivity crossover where fibre-optic broadband and the national grid meet. This makes the area particularly well placed to home data centres, as well as an innovation hub. The Minister also mentioned advanced manufacturing, where the region has real strength. I am very fortunate to have companies such as ATP Electronics and Gestamp in my constituency. I hope that we will build on companies such as these.

That is not to say that we should be turning our back on our energy heritage. Only this morning in the BEIS Committee, we met stakeholders from the energy industry who highlighted the importance of the sector. With the closure of coal-fired power stations, there is a desperate need to build gas-fired power stations as part of our mix of energy sources. As the national grid infrastructure is already in place, Rugeley is ideally placed to home a gas-fired power station. Earlier in the debate, the Chair of the Committee, the hon. Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright), made the important point that industrial strategy needs to be cross-departmental. I have previously raised with Ministers issues about the cumbersome process for securing planning for a gas-fired power station on sites where there had been coal-fired power stations. This is not a change of use. I ask BEIS Ministers to review this with their colleagues from the Department for Communities and Local Government.

The redevelopment of Rugeley is a once-in-a-generation opportunity. I believe that all bodies involved in the planning process are strategic and visionary, and bold and ambitious, and that they can create a home for successful and innovative businesses that create real, skilled jobs and opportunities for the next generation. An industrial strategy that has productivity at its heart, encourages entrepreneurship and innovation, and creates opportunities for young people could provide the framework to ensure that we create an exciting future for Rugeley.

4.18 pm

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): I have spent a lot of the past two days in the Chamber, and it has been pretty instructive. Yesterday I learned the
[Kirsty Blackman]

word “contemporaneous” and today the word “oligopoly”, which I had not heard before, so I feel as though I am learning things. The thing that I have not yet learned is what an industrial strategy is, because everybody in the entire Chamber has come up with a different idea of what they think it is and what it should be. I am not going to break with that; I am going to say what I think an industrial strategy should be.

As Members would expect me to say, oil and gas should be top, front and centre of the UK Government’s industrial strategy. It is, without question, the most important industry in the UK. Over the five years from 2008 to 2013, the average annual tax revenue from the oil and gas industry was £9.4 billion. That figure represents direct production taxes; it does not include all of the economic benefits to wider economic areas that the UK Government have also seen.

The industry is not having the best of times: the oil price is low and we are struggling and losing jobs. Things are not all that much fun in Aberdeen and the north-east, which is why it is even more important that this Government commit to ensuring that the oil and gas industry is right up there in the industrial strategy. The oil and gas industry has a bright future, but we need to ensure that Members in this place in particular understand what is happening in the industry and take positive action to secure its long-term future.

Aberdeen city, Aberdeenshire and, indeed, the UK as a whole are the absolute gold standard for the oil industry across the world. If a technology is being used on the UK continental shelf, companies know that it will be accepted anywhere across the world and they will say, “That’s brilliant. It’s the gold standard and we should do that.” The Government need to ensure that that continues.

There is no doubt that we will be taking oil out of the North sea for a long time yet. People can have a discussion about exactly how many billion barrels of oil are left, but everybody agrees that there are billions left. We need to ensure that we maximise the amount of oil that we extract from the North sea, and that our supply chain companies are supported to continue to do the brilliant work that they do on the UKCS and in exporting. It is an export industry. In 2013, Aberdeen had the fourth highest number of patents per head of population of any city in the UK. It was not quite the highest, but we have done an amazing amount of innovation in our city, and we are acknowledged to be a centre of excellence. It is impossible to overstate how valuable that has been to the UK Treasury. We have paid taxes to it for years and we will continue to do so.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Until we are independent.

Kirsty Blackman: Absolutely. We need to ensure that we get UK Government support now and that companies are incentivised to invest. If they stop investing, the industry will not have a bright future. Some companies are struggling with cash-flow issues. The UK Government need to inspire confidence in the industry by ensuring that private equity people invest and that banks continue to do so. The industrial strategy must express the UK Government’s confidence in the future of the oil and gas industry. That is really important for Aberdeen, the north-east and the wider UK. So many jobs are indirectly linked to oil and gas, and we need to keep them.

I want to address a couple of the things that were mentioned earlier. On apprenticeships and the young work force, Aberdeen has an initiative called “Developing the Young Workforce North East”, which is a brilliant piece of work linking industry with schools. It resulted from Ian Wood’s 2014 report, “Developing the Young Workforce”, which was presented to the Scottish Government. We are making really positive moves and it is being widely welcomed and recognised. The UK Government should consider incorporating it into the industrial strategy.

I thank the Minister for listening and ask him please to make sure that the oil and gas industry is at the top of the industrial strategy.

Richard Fuller: That is not likely.

Mr Baker: That is not likely.

Richard Fuller: I know that there is little chance of that.

George Brown, the noble Lord Heseltine, the noble Lord Mandelson, Vince Cable—to this hallowed series of greats we should now add the names of the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation and the Secretary of State as the people who will champion our industrial strategy for our country. There are no two better minds in this House that we could apply to the task, but my concern is that we are sending our best brains in pursuit of a nonsense.

As the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) and to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White) on securing the debate. May I apologise to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to other Members for not being here for a number of speeches? I hope I do not repeat what has been said.

Mr Baker: That is not likely.

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I thank the Minister for listening and ask him please to make sure that the oil and gas industry is at the top of the industrial strategy.
of a goal, but what is the goal for an entire economy and, if there is a goal, how on earth is it the Government’s role to tell everyone what it is? That went out in the 1940s and ’50s with Soviet planning. I know that my friend the Minister has no interest in returning to those days, but unfortunately he may unwittingly, in his endeavours, encourage Opposition Members to think that the good old days of centralised socialism are back. He would not wish to be a fellow traveller on that journey to despair.

Industrial strategy, we are told, is positive because it enables us to think about the long term, but that is what shareholders do. We think about the news cycle and we think about the election cycle. We have to make sure that, in five years, we are re-elected. When we talk about consensus in other countries, we have to recognise that consensus in this country is built differently; it comes from the competition of ideas, and from one set of new ideas being subsequently accepted by the opposing party. The promotion by the Conservative party under Margaret Thatcher of a reduction in the power of trade unions and a liberalisation of markets was accepted by the subsequent Labour Government. The Labour Government’s introduction of the national minimum wage and regulation against discrimination in the workplace was accepted by the coalition Government. That is how we build consensus, and that is not compatible with the expectation that one can set an industrial strategy that stands for all time. The Minister will be here, I am sure, until he gets promoted, but at some stage—perhaps in 20 years’ time—the Opposition will get ready to take over power, at which point the long-term plan may be picked apart.

To be slightly more helpful to the Minister, I will point to some areas that he and his colleagues might like to look at. Although I would not call these things an industrial strategy, they might be good ideas. If we are to be successful, as my hon. Friend the Member for Havant (Mr Mak) mentioned, we have to promote innovation. Innovation is promoted by lowering taxes, ensuring that our markets are flexible, and looking carefully at regulatory sunsets to ensure that incumbents cannot use regulation to defend themselves against insurgents. Corporate governance also needs to be looked at seriously, as we discussed in the previous debate.

I commend my right hon. Friend the Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne) for his productivity plan, not because it was about projects, but because it for the first time concentrated on what the Government can do regarding strategy, which is the implementation of things that are helpful, particularly for infrastructure. We need only look at the difficulties with the expansion of airport capacity in the south-east to see that we are very poor at implementing the decisions we make. I commend the productivity plan to the Minister for him to look at again.

The Prime Minister has rightly said that the United Kingdom is at the forefront of free trade. That is something on which the Minister and I clearly agree. Free trade is what the United Kingdom does best. We need to make sure we have appropriate protection against dumping, but we also need to be on the front foot in lowering our tariffs.

We are leaving the European Union, which is a major event for the whole of our economy. I understand that the Government want to form a view on that and know what actions they should take in the short term to assist us through this transition to a better and stronger future. However, each of these are things that the Government would do anyway. We do not need a Department for industrial strategy to do them; we do not need such a Department to improve our skills. We do not need one to change the law regarding the governance of our boards, although I agree with the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) that the Government should do that. We do not need the phrase “industrial strategy”. I am worried for the Minister in that, as he pursues it, he will set the Government up for a fall. I, for one, want to support the Government in their endeavours so that that does not happen.

4.31 pm

George Kerevan (East Lothian) (SNP): I am glad to be tail-end Charlie. Fortunately for someone in this situation, my book on industrial policy is published next month, so I may save time and send it to the Minister.

The challenge is: is there an industrial policy? I accept that there is no generic policy—the hon. Member for Bedford (Richard Fuller) is correct—but there is industrial strategy in the here and now. Its definition is what the state does to help to provide competitive advantage to the companies in that state. If the state does not do that, other states will help theirs, which will wipe out those companies. I remind the hon. Gentleman that that is why the UK’s exports have flattened for the past five years.

I put that point to the Chancellor of the Exchequer yesterday, and he spoke about international conditions and lack of demand. Yet Germany’s total industrial exports have risen by a third in the past five years, helped by the German Government. They tax industry more than it is taxed in this country, but they pour the money back into industrial support. In the United States, generations of productivity growth have been funded by investment in its defence industries, which flows through into the private sector. The point about the state picking winners is that there is a partnership in which the state backs up its industries, and particularly its companies. The state gets out of the way where it needs to, but there has to be such a partnership.

I do not have a lot of time, so I will do something really strange, which is to support something that has been a Government policy for the past five years. I was originally very cynical about it, but the more I have researched it and talked to people in the industry, the more I think it has been very successful, although it may have been stumbled on by accident. That is the policy of having Catapult centres. Public money is put into centres for technology that small companies cannot buy on their own, so that such companies can use it, which helps to provide a competitive advantage. Catapult centres provide competitive grants and challenge companies to come up with solutions to problems, and that works. Catapult centres are the solution. They are not about picking winners, but about creating a competitive environment and providing resources. If we do not do that, other countries will.

To give a very simple example, there is a close correlation between exports as a percentage of GDP and how much is spent on research and development—not blue-skies...
R and D in universities, but industrial R and D. In countries that have a higher share of exports in their GDP, industrial R and D is orders of magnitude higher than the amount we spend, because their Governments and their military put money into it. The hon. Member for Havant (Mr Mak) made a very good point about the role of the military.

I found a statistic that my good friend the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) might like, as an ex-RAF officer. At the moment, the RAF has 475 aircraft that were built in Britain. For the first time, the majority of its aircraft have been bought from abroad—507 of them. I should say that I tried to bump up the number of British-built planes by including the Spitfires in the Battle of Britain memorial flight. If we buy from Boeing and Lockheed, and let those companies use their technology, we cannot survive. We have to use the weight of the state behind our companies. That is what industrial policy is about.

My final point is that the budget for the Catapult centres is about £600 million a year. That sounds a lot, but if we look at a comparable organisation in Finland, we find that its budget is about 75% of that. The UK spend is peanuts. We should treble that amount. Will some of that money be wasted? Yes, but some will produce the ideas and new technology that we need.

4.35 pm

Roger Mullin (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): What a pleasure it is to follow my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan). As he was talking, I wrote down the following: “Until I read my hon. Friend’s book, I will remain in some sympathy with the hon. Member for Bedford (Richard Fuller) and my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman).” One problem, as I see it, with nearly every other contribution, except that of my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh West (Michelle Thomson) is that no one has mentioned what, to me, is critical in anything that calls itself a strategy—namely, what its purpose is.

What is the purpose of this thing we call an industrial strategy? Since we all have our own ideas to share, I am assuming that at the end of the day its purpose would be to help propel economic growth to support people’s wellbeing. That assumption might not be shared by everyone in the Chamber—I do not know whether it is shared even by my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian—but I will frame my few remarks around it.

I enjoyed the opening remarks of the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White). He led the debate with a bit of a historical review of past efforts at industrial strategies. He also pleaded for us to look to the future in our new context. In that historical light, I was also interested to hear the hon. Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker) indicate that he had read the works of Adam Smith. Since my constituency, Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath, is the home of Adam Smith, I feel compelled to venture a few thoughts to continue the hon. Gentleman’s education.

Mr Baker: Adam Smith was catastrophically wrong about the labour theory of value and has much to answer for, but I look forward to hearing the hon. Gentleman’s remarks.

Roger Mullin: I wish the hon. Gentleman would not mince his words—he should say it as he really feels it.

Where Smith has some relevance is in his argument that critical to growth was the division of labour in society, with specialisation—what we might call today the importance of having the education and skills that allow us to promote innovation and change. That is what spurs longer-term growth, and on that he was absolutely correct. That important need to drive forward with new technologies and new thinking is why it is utter madness that the Government pulled out of one of the biggest world-leading research projects, the carbon capture project in the north-east of Scotland. If ever there was an indicator of their turning their mind away from what is fundamental to long-term economic growth, it is that decision.

The other thing Adam Smith said that I completely approve of is that there is a role for state intervention. In particular, it is to ensure the kind of education that supports society economically as well as socially. We cannot leave education and skills to the marketplace. We have to make sure they are taken care of.

I was interested by the way in which Members talked about the importance of technology. It strikes me that historically, one of the problems we have had with funding is that we have plenty of people in our universities and the like who are able to come up with great technological ideas and innovations, but those innovations take many years to reach the marketplace. Private sector investment seems best when it is either at or near the marketplace. The problem, very often, has been the gap between the idea and bringing it to fruition. That is where the need for the role of the Scottish Investment Bank comes in, and I think that is what my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian was hinting at when he talked about the valuable work of the Catapult centres. They can attract different forms of funding in a competitive way for things that may take time to reach the marketplace.

I was interested in the remarks made about the challenge that we face because of Brexit. The Government’s response, chaotic as it is, is driving down confidence. My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh West talked about the importance of confidence. That reminded me of what Keynes argued, which was that the principal determinant of the level of private investment is not the rate of interest nor even the level of aggregate demand, but the state of business confidence.

Kelvin Hopkins: I am listening with great interest to the hon. Gentleman. I always enjoy his speeches, I have to say. When it comes to the EU, however, does he not accept that confidence has been driven down by those who lost the argument and the vote, who are constantly saying that it will be terribly damaging and an economic disaster? In fact, as Ashoka Mody has said, it is actually proving to be quite beneficial.

Roger Mullin: I would take issue with the latter part of the hon. Gentleman’s observations. We were on the opposite side of the argument, but surely he would agree that the Government’s response to the vote has been utterly chaotic? We are no further forward four months later than we were at the time as to what the Government mean by Brexit and how they are going to take us there. That is doing nothing other than driving down confidence in business.
I do not want to take up too much time, but let me come on to one further important issue that was raised, which is in the general sphere of education. That is the importance of the post-study work visa. I would add to that the tier 1 entrepreneur visa. We need to encourage people from overseas to come to this country to help us drive up business investment and innovative ideas. I read an essay by a friend of mine, Professor David Simpson, a few weeks’ ago. He pointed out that one third of successful business start-ups in California between 1980 and 2000 were by people who had come from either India or China. At a time when we need, not least in Scotland, to attract the best minds to help to drive forward the economy, setting our face against that cannot be in anyone’s interest. It certainly cannot be in the interest of anything we might call an industrial strategy.

4.44 pm

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to speak for the Opposition in this debate and to follow so many interesting, provocative and informative contributions. I have not agreed with all of them—or at least all of all of them—but I have been pleased to listen to them. I congratulate the Backbench Business Committee on bringing forward the debate.

I want to single out some contributions, however difficult that is among so many. The opening contribution was from the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Chris White), who spoke eloquently and compellingly about the importance of having an industrial strategy. I mention, too, the contributions of my hon. Friend the Member for Hove (Peter Kyle), the hon. Member for Havant (Mr Mak), who sponsored the recent debate on the fourth industrial revolution, and my hon. Friend the Member for Hartlepool (Mr Wright), who chairs the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee.

It crucial for this House to show the nation and the world that industry is what we are about. I am grateful for the contribution of the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation in setting out the beginnings of a timetable for an industrial strategy, but it would have been nice to hear something concrete on the subject from the Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the hon. Member for Hereford and South Herefordshire (Jesse Norman), and I look forward to doing so.

As the contributions from Members of all parties have shown, industrial strategy is an issue that this House takes very seriously. Labour Members have made it absolutely clear that we recognise the hugely positive contribution that industry makes. Industry—and the businesses and workers that form it—drives our nation’s economic success and positive outcomes for our constituents. We can see the majority of their work automated in the next 10 years. I want this Government to be proactive and to use technology to help create more jobs for people across the country. Sadly, however, the Science and Technology Committee has condemned the Government for the complete absence of a strategy on digital.

In 2010, the Conservatives claimed that they would restore the balance between sectors of our economy, but manufacturing is still at the same level as in every year since 2007, accounting for 10% of economic output. In fact, the Conservatives have starved our communities with their austerity agenda. That agenda is now apparently forgotten, but my constituents merit an apology for what they have had to suffer in the name of austerity—and, unfortunately, that will be as nothing by comparison with the impact of the hard Brexit that we see the three Brexiteers attempting to implement.

We have seen the Conservatives’ lack of strategy for our industries in the disintegrating and fragmenting of our industrial support infrastructure. Innovation, for example, is now promoted by at least three separate bodies—Innovate UK, the research councils and NESTA—as well as the Catapult centres. The Government have starved regions outside London by abolishing regional development agencies and providing no replacement for them.

Each industrial age needs leadership from the Government. Harold Wilson said in his famous 1960s “white heat of technology” speech that innovation was driving us in a new direction, but we need leadership to embrace the changes and—this is very important—to ensure that that direction is for the benefit of us all, because growth has a direction. We have seen the third industrial revolution, but now we need leadership more than ever as the next waves of technological change break over us.

We would welcome the Government’s late coming to an understanding of the importance of industrial strategy, but unfortunately—as was pointed out earlier by my
hon. Friend the Member for Norwich South (Clive Lewis) —the Tories have shown time and again that, although they can talk the talk, they cannot walk the walk. Since the Prime Minister took office, she has ignored the need for a digital industrial strategy. The Digital Economy Bill, which is currently in Committee, ignores the opportunities that the digital revolution could provide for businesses in Britain, and that has resulted in very real neglect. As we heard earlier, one of our tech success stories, ARM Holdings in Cambridge, was sold to Japanese investors with no reassurances about job security for the 3,000 people who worked there.

The Minister for Digital and Culture (Matt Hancock): Just on a point of fact, assurances were given that the number of jobs would increase.

Chi Onwurah: I am glad that the Minister has attempted to make a contribution to supporting our industrial strategy, but we remember the assurances that were given in the case of, for example, Cadbury and Kraft. Assurances need to be concrete if we are to see the benefits, and we need to have the necessary powers.

Matt Hancock: Those assurances are legally binding.

Chi Onwurah: I am glad that the Minister has seen fit to intervene again. I look forward to those assurances being proven, and I look forward to his apology should that not be the case.

The Tories’ legacy for Britain’s industrial future will be one of apathy and incompetence. There is no vision for business, or how it could bring about a more just society. On energy, on automotive, on materials, on manufacturing, on food and drink, on agribusiness, on process industries, on biotech, on steel, on tech and on the creative industries, it is for us in the Labour party to provide the leadership on industrial strategy that the country needs so much.

4.54 pm

Chris White: I am pleased to follow the shadow Minister. I was enjoying her speech, until it all seemed to go a bit wrong towards the end. Where I finished listening was where she said that she welcomed the Government’s initiative to have an industrial strategy. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for providing time for the debate and to everyone who has had the opportunity to speak.

I take from the hon. Member for Aberdeen North (Kirsty Blackman) what she said at the beginning of her speech, which was that, basically, everyone had a different interpretation of what industrial strategy was all about. I do not think there is anything wrong with that. That is the purpose of this debate: to provide an opportunity for everyone in the Chamber who indicated a wish to speak to give their take on an industrial strategy.

I would go back one step further. I look forward to reading the book by the hon. Member for East Lothian (George Kerevan) when it finally comes out—I am sure that it will be selling round the corners. Until that time, I recommend anyone to read the book by Lawrence Freedman, “Strategy: a History”. It is important for us all to return to the definition of strategy. The shortest, most precise definition that I have come across is to get the furthest with the most. I do not think that is a bad foundation for this debate.

I would like to refer to my very good friend, my hon. Friend the Member for Bedford (Richard Fuller). I am sure that the House would agree that he was enjoying his speech far too much. He put a spanner in the works of otherwise consensual and positive debate with his desire to hold to the philosophy of a free-for-all—everything is for the best in the best possible world. I hope that he will come around to welcoming the pragmatic opportunities provided by the initiative that, through the Minister, is being formed. Discussion papers are being written. We are again going to be able to have our say, I hope. This matter will come back to the House for further debate. None the less, I imagine that all Members would agree that it is better to have this debate now.

Kelvin Hopkins: I much enjoyed the hon. Gentleman’s speech and agree with what he is saying, but the point that has not been answered is my point: low wages and flooding the market with cheap labour does not help investment. It keeps productivity at low levels. If we are going to see high investment in modern technology, we need to raise wages and stop flooding the market with cheap labour.

Chris White: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, but I suggest that a proper and full industrial strategy that looks at issues such as productivity would take those issues into account.

I thank all hon. Members on both sides of the House for their contributions, and I express my appreciation to the Chair of the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee for the work that it is doing on the issue.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered industrial strategy.

INTELLIGENCE AND SECURITY COMMITTEE

Ordered.

That Richard Benyon and Mr David Hanson be appointed to the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament under section 1 of the Justice and Security Act 2013 in place of Sir Alan Duncan who ceased in accordance with paragraph 1(2)(b) of Schedule 1 to that Act to be a member of the Committee when he became a Minister of the Crown and Mr George Howarth who has resigned as a member of the Committee in accordance with paragraph 1(3)(a) of Schedule 1 to that Act. —[Michael Ellis.]
Heathrow (Southern Rail Link)

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

5 pm

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful for the opportunity to address this topic, which is of enormous importance to my constituents in Feltham and Heston, to London and to the entire south of England.

Providing southern rail access is a welcome proposal to connect areas that lie to the south of Heathrow to the airport by rail. However this is not just about getting people to their plane on time; the right scheme has the potential to transform public transport provision and regenerate areas with some of the highest levels of deprivation not just in London but in the country. In the nearby wards in my constituency where this development would take place—Bedfont, Hanworth, Feltham North, Feltham West—over 30% of children live in poverty.

To me it is scandalous that the world’s busiest airport is not connected to south London and the whole of the south for want of a few kilometres of track linking Heathrow to Waterloo, intermediate stations in Hounslow and the whole of the south-east and south-west.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. My constituency as well as hers would benefit from the Heathrow opportunity area, as set out in the London plan, might look like.

Let me outline Hounslow’s proposal. Last year, Hounslow Council commissioned its own study from the respected transport consultant WSP-PB to review the possibility of a new rail alignment between Heathrow terminal 5 and the south-western main line immediately to the west of Feltham station. This would include a new station at Bedfont, in the vicinity of the successful Bedfont Lakes business park and near to the Clockhouse roundabout on the A30. Hounslow’s proposal tries to ensure that this nationally important infrastructure does not just deliver passengers to Heathrow. The inclusion of a new station in the Bedfont area, which would be placed on a new spur railway line running from Feltham to Heathrow airport, would allow for direct services to Heathrow from London Waterloo.

The new station and the associated bus routes that would be developed to serve it would enhance the public transport accessibility level of the site from level 1—very poor—to about level 4, which would be good. In practice, this would mean a significantly enhanced public transport service, benefiting those who live and work in the area as well as opening up the potential for sustainable development and much-needed housing. Through work completed at its own cost, Hounslow Council has estimated the benefit-to-cost ratio of a station in the Bedfont area to be between 2.78:1 and 5:1. Again, this represents very high value for money.

The benefits to the community would be enormous. Around 50% of people in my constituency have jobs directly or indirectly connected to Heathrow. A recent local plan master-planning exercise undertaken by Hounslow Council identified the potential to create a whole new front door to the airport, which would be unlocked by this new rail alignment and station. This vision is finally starting to put meat on the bones of what the Heathrow opportunity area, as set out in the London plan, might look like.

It is clear that any significant growth in this area would require new transport infrastructure to be both viable and deliverable. The Government therefore have a golden opportunity to deliver a step change to Heathrow’s accessibility from the south, and to help to unlock the potential for up to 13,000 new jobs and more than 7,000 new homes on London’s borders. The Minister will also
be aware of the need to curb emissions around the airport in order to combat climate change and improve air quality. The newly elected Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, has championed the need to improve air quality, even during his first few months in office. Heathrow’s submission to the Airports Commission argued that this proposal would also reduce road journeys to the airport by 3%, improving air quality and reducing congestion.

I am therefore pleased that Hounslow Council has this year commissioned Network Rail to review the WSP-PB report, advise the council on its feasibility, run the proposal through its models and highlight the infrastructure and environmental risks as it sees them. It is a shame, however, that we are having to play catch-up. When Network Rail undertook its research, local stakeholders were deliberately not engaged in relation to the options being considered. Indeed, it was not until after the project’s completion that Hounslow Council was informed that its proposal was not being included and would need to be considered separately.

I understand that the consultation being undertaken by Network Rail at the time was curtailed by the Department for Transport due to concerns about the potential impact on the Davies commission process. The reasons were never clear, but my view is that more could have been done, even within the constraints of the Davies commission, to include the local voice. I am therefore concerned that the process did not make the best use of public money. The report did not achieve as much as it could have done had it engaged with local leaders in a more collaborative manner, which they would have been willing to do. As a result, Hounslow Council is paying Network Rail £51,000 from limited reserves to peer review the Hounslow proposal and test it to the same level as the other indicative options proposed. While I acknowledge and appreciate the more constructive working in recent months with the DFT and Network Rail, that financial commitment is testament to the seriousness with which Hounslow Council takes this proposal. The council wants urgently to ensure that the alignment is taken forward as an option on a par with other proposed options for southern rail access into the next stage of feasibility, where it could be considered and potentially combined with other options when further work is commissioned.

As mentioned before, Network Rail has estimated the benefit-cost ratio of southern rail access to be in the order of 16.4:1, but it is worth noting that some changes have recently been proposed to how the DFT is looking to appraise such projects. The changes will place greater importance on the wider economic benefits of such schemes, in particular their role in unlocking new jobs and homes. Given that and the wider benefits of Hounslow’s proposal, that benefit-cost ratio is likely to be even higher than estimated.

In conclusion, improved rail access to the airport from the south is a pressing need regardless of whether Heathrow expands. The southern rail access to Heathrow project, with more direct and quicker links to Waterloo and the south, will make a huge difference for my constituency, for the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), for London and for the country. Hounslow’s proposal would meet the DFT’s strategic objectives for southern rail access by reducing congestion, improving the environment, increasing connectivity to the airport, and enabling much-needed regeneration of the local area.

I will therefore be grateful if the Minister answers the following. What steps need to be taken for the proposal to be formally included in the industry advice to be issued in 2017? What progress needs to be made for the indicative options for the southern rail access scheme to go forward into the next funding rounds for control period 6—2019 to 2024—if not before? What would the funding options be? What strategic role would the Government play in moving the project forward to the next stage of feasibility, after which securing private development funding may be a more likely option? I am grateful to have had the opportunity to speak on this topic today.

5.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): I congratulate the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston (Seema Malhotra) on securing this debate on a matter that is of great importance to her constituents. She touched on the subject of surface connectivity to our airports, which is an issue of national importance, and on how public transport can address inequality across the nation and in her constituency.

The hon. Lady’s points raise some eternal truths of both transport and urban policy. Cities with good airport rail links are more productive than those without. The shorter the access time to the airport, the more productive that city is.

Anyone who is here today hoping to discover our decision on airport capacity can move along because there will be no clues—I am no wiser than Opposition Members. Whatever the decision, however, this subject is always at the forefront of my mind because it will ensure the continued growth of our nation as a whole.

It is also clear that there has been a long-suppressed need for improved access to Heathrow from its south. Many passengers still access the airport by road, and uncompetitive rail journey times do not help with that. I used to traverse the hon. Lady’s constituency on many occasions on the 285 bus trying to get to Heathrow, and I took a very circuitous route around the airport perimeter and sundry car parks—it took an awful long time. That does little to encourage a modal shift off the road and on to rail, and it certainly does not do much to improve air quality in her constituency, to which she rightly drew attention.

The feasibility study that Network Rail carried out has to be a key part of how we consider improving southern access to Heathrow, and it is worth just thinking how access to Heathrow has changed over the decades. Just 25 years or so ago, only 20% of Heathrow’s passengers used public transport to get to the airport. The Heathrow Express opened in 1998, following on from the start of the Piccadilly line trains running there in 1977, and so by 2015, more than 40% of passengers were reaching Heathrow by public transport. That is a great step forward, but those people are still not coming from the south of the airport, which is a point the hon. Lady is trying to make.

Such statistics fuel our aspirations to do better and to have a better connected United Kingdom. I recognise
that we can and need to do far more. The Government have come to power with a strong infrastructure mandate, particularly regarding rail, where customer numbers have doubled and freight has grown by 75%. More people are travelling by rail than ever before. We are spending £40 billion between 2014 and 2019 to support a larger and more mobile population. The hon. Lady lives somewhere that is a key part of not only her local transport network, but an international transport network. We are under no illusions about what a huge challenge we face in upgrading a network that, in many cases, has not seen improvements since the era of steam engines in the 1950s. We are trying to fit our improvements into a relatively short timeframe, on a network that is used more intensively than ever before. That gives us limited scope for how we put into the network complicated enhancement projects that risk disrupting ongoing rail services for customers in the here and now. We have to bear that in mind, too.

It will not be long until Crossrail opens in full—in 2019—which will bring not just the heart of London's financial district, but much of east London to within 60 minutes of Heathrow. That will dramatically improve passengers' experience of train travel, with services carrying up to 72,000 passengers an hour through London during the peak periods. That improvement of surface access will be replicated to both Luton and Gatwick thanks to the Thameslink programme. We are going to be improving substantially surface access across the UK, which is one reason why London TravelWatch has identified southern rail access to Heathrow as a particular gap, which we still need to focus on. That is why Network Rail is developing its proposals on the western rail link into Heathrow, off the Great Western railway. Subject to a satisfactory business case, funding in the next control period and the agreement of acceptable terms with the Heathrow aviation industry, that will also open up new journey opportunities by providing four trains an hour between Reading and Heathrow airport.

Southern access to Heathrow is certainly at a less mature stage of project planning, but it is absolutely part of our considerations for the long-term strategic vision for the railway. As I said, the absence of adequate rail infrastructure in this part of London was a key finding in that London TravelWatch report, and we should not forget that. I am always conscious that when we talk about such infrastructure projects that we tend to focus on economic benefits to the nation as a whole. I certainly hear what the hon. Lady says about the generation of Bedfont, Feltham and other areas, and I do not doubt what she has to say for one moment. We have learned that good planning is vital and that before every decision we really have to ask how it will benefit customers. We need to show a clear link to user benefit. These things must be good value for money, affordable and deliverable, but they must also be the right solution. As a Minister, I want to start not by identifying what the output is in terms of a piece of infrastructure or kit, but by understanding properly what the problem is, and what the solutions to it are. After that comes the answer on infrastructure investment, and that was why we were very clear in asking Network Rail in its initial feasibility study to identify whether there was a potential market. That might seem self-evident—to me, it certainly is self-evident—but we need to understand the size of that market, the flows of that market and what success would look like in terms of meeting the needs of that market. Network Rail looked at a range of options, with which the hon. Lady is familiar, and found very clear, strong demands for routes from Richmond and further out into Woking and Surrey, as well as inland from Waterloo.

I heard some of the hon. Lady's comments about the way in which Network Rail went about this, and she mentioned the “Guide to Rail Investment Process”. It is important to stress at this stage that, in that particular report, Network Rail was trying to define both the scale of demand and how that demand could be met with a series of indicative proposals. I do not think that, at this stage, there is any thought of excluding any one proposal, or even of recommending a particular proposal.

The hon. Lady mentioned the initial industry advice, which is yet to reach Government. Network Rail is part of the rail delivery group that is putting together this industry advice. I know that it has met her and that it is closely liaising with Hounslow Council. Her proposal is now on the industry's radar, so I have no doubt that it will be under consideration as part of the initial industry advice. There will be a series of options and investment opportunities that Ministers will be able to consider. Once again, this is about defining the problem, the outputs that could solve that problem, and the varying benefits and disbenefits of a whole range of options. I recognise that the council's presentation has its merits, and that it needs to be included and considered as part of that process. I am sure that the industry will be doing that. I look forward to hearing the initial industry advice before we take our decisions further.

To progress the scheme further, I recognise that additional funding for further development will need to be secured. That will allow Network Rail to develop possible infrastructure solutions and to understand the costs and outputs of the scheme so that funding decisions can be taken. The Wessex route study—the feasibility study—will be taken into account in the initial industry advice, as will the Hounslow scheme, to form a coherent and integrated funding strategy. Businesses such as Heathrow Express, Great Western Railway, MTR Crossrail and TFL are all playing a role in drafting the initial industry advice, but the work is being led by Network Rail, which is helping to form the funding decisions.

Mims Davies (Eastleigh) (Con): The Minister makes some important points about the reach of southern rail. I am listening intently as Southampton airport is in my constituency. I understand the importance of the Wessex route study and connectivity to Gatwick and Heathrow. In the work that we are doing around new franchises, I would like to see us being really bold about opportunities for Network Rail.

Paul Maynard: I thank my hon. Friend for that comment. As a former resident of the royal borough of Richmond upon Thames, I am always conscious that, for many of the residents there, Southampton was often an easier airport to reach than Heathrow, and the journey was actually better value and more convenient. Given the physical gap between the two places, that says a lot about the absence of rail connectivity to Heathrow. I hear what she says in light of the re-franchising that will be occurring.
[Paul Maynard]

I am delighted that Hounslow Council has taken the initiative to develop its own proposals and engineering solution. I know that Network Rail has met the hon. Member for Feltham and Heston and the council to take this matter forward, providing more expertise to highlight some of the key risks and issues that will need to be considered, as well as evaluating both journey time and train planning proposals. Any proposals to add trains to a network always involve complicated timetabling challenges that certainly elude my limited brain power in working out what fits where. We should always check whether we can fit things on the network before we start to over-promise what we cannot deliver. None the less, I welcome the work that is going on.

In the event that we can secure additional funding to take this forward to GRIP 1-2, we must consider it alongside other engineering schemes such as—but not limited to—those proposals that are also in the Network Rail feasibility study. We must derive maximum benefit from each and every investment decision that we make. We also have to take stock of what we are doing now to lay the groundwork for future investment. I am sure that the hon. Lady is aware of the work that is about to start at London Waterloo to vastly expand its capacity there, along with longer platforms for longer trains at a number of stations on the Reading line.

Work is not yet due to begin at Feltham, I know, but we are working through the complicated issue of a level crossing there. There will be 30 brand-new trains providing 150 extra carriages, and more Crossrail to come, as I said earlier.

There is a lot of good news in the hon. Lady’s constituency regarding rail investment, but I recognise that there is a particular gap in our network around Heathrow, so I welcome her contribution today. I hope I have reassured her that her proposals are on the Government’s radar and certainly on Network Rail’s radar. I look forward to receiving the initial industry advice and I am sure that once we have wider decisions about south-east airport capacity, this debate will take shape and grow, so I thank the hon. Lady for her time today.

Question put and agreed to.

5.26 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Friday 21 October 2016

The House met at half-past Nine o’clock

PRAYERS

The Chairman of Ways and Means took the Chair as Deputy Speaker (Standing Order No. 3).

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Before we begin today’s proceedings, may I place on the record that a few minutes ago, at 9.15 am, we observed one minute’s silence in remembrance of those who lost their lives in the Aberfan disaster 50 years ago?

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): I beg to move, That the House sit in private.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 163), and negatived.

Sexual Offences (Pardons Etc) Bill

Second Reading

9.35 am

John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

It is a great pleasure to welcome so many Members of the House to their places. When I was born in the 1960s—[Hon. Members: “No!”] It is hard to believe, I know. Members will notice that I did not say at which end of the 1960s I was born. At that time, two men who were in love could be sent to prison for what they chose to do in the privacy of their own homes. It is hard to fathom the mindset of those who defended such gross intrusion into the lives and rights of others. When we read the speeches made in this place at the time of the decriminalisation Act, the Sexual Offences Act 1967, we see that many Members presumed to tell their fellow citizens who they could and could not love, often couching their speeches in the most prurient and lascivious terms.

So it went on. Even after decriminalisation, numerous homophobic laws remained on the statute book—laws that existed only to enshrine inequality, ensuring that gay men could never enjoy the full fruits of equal citizenship. When I was a student at Glasgow University, the student union banned the university gay society from holding meetings and dances on its premises. The gay students could do absolutely nothing about that, because there was no equality protection under the law.

When I left university and applied for a job in the civil service and the diplomatic service, I was told that I had to sign an affidavit confirming that I was not gay. I would not do that, and therefore I could not qualify for the post. In the 1980s, the tabloids screamed abuse about gay men and AIDS, and it was routine to conflate homosexuality with paedophilia.

Small wonder that it was hard to come out as gay. I confess that I found it tough. I came from a modest Presbyterian background, I went to church every Sunday, I went to Sunday school and I went to the crusaders. I prayed not to be gay. At school, gay was the worst taunt possible. There were, hon. Members may remember, gay and straight ways of throwing a ball, and it was important to be very sure which was which. [Interruption.] My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) laughs in clear recognition.

We had few, if any, role models. The TV stars Larry Grayson and John Inman were staples of Saturday night television who fitted the gay stereotype: comic characters who were single and, as we know from their biographies, in denial about who they were. The future as a young gay boy did not look promising. Who would want to be gay in a country where gay people had to hide who they were, lie if they wanted certain jobs and even lie if they wanted to keep their jobs? It was, after all, legal for an employer to sack someone simply because they had discovered that that person was gay. Anyone could refuse to rent a house to a gay person. A gay couple could be arrested if they shared a hotel room, because the law did not recognise hotel rooms as private spaces. Perhaps most horrifyingly of all—here we come to the crux of today’s debate—a 21-year-old man who slept with his 20-year-old boyfriend could be arrested and tried, convicted and sentenced for under-age sex.
As a young journalist I made a film about how the law discriminated against gay men; in fact, I confess that it was I who took Edwina Currie to Amsterdam, at a time when she was not especially interested in this subject, as I wanted to confront her with the full horrors of gay law reform and equality. She came back a changed character—perhaps it was a couple of the clubs I took her to—determined to reform the law, because she had seen the way that gay law reform could work in practice.

In that film, I interviewed military personnel with exemplary records who had been followed home by the military police as they were determined to investigate a tip off that the soldier, Air Force man or naval officer concerned was living privately with a same-sex partner. When interviewed those personnel could be disciplined if they lied, but of course they could be and were sacked if they told the truth—damned whatever choice they made.

It was not until the 1990s that the European Court—yes, the great Satan itself—overturned the services ban in the teeth of military opposition. Military men hit the airwaves to predict the collapse of the British Navy, where such behaviour had previously never been known; Nelson, it seems, had never been kissed. Across the pond, Colin Powell was shamefully arguing the same tosh, in his case claiming that straight soldiers would never share a shower with gay soldiers if they knew their true nature. Much better to hide and share the shower, if we follow Mr Powell’s logic; I do not.

In my documentary I interviewed gay men who had been entrapped by so-called pretty policemen. I also interviewed Chief Constable Anderton of Greater Manchester, beloved of the tabloids as “God’s copper”, with a bushy black beard of biblical proportions. He sat at his desk and defended the practice of sending out attractive young male police officers who would give gay men the eye; if the gay man responded, he would be arrested and his life would be ruined. Since announcing the Bill, I have had letters from people who have told me of their exact experience of being entrapped by police officers and how it ruined their life. This entrapment was a police priority in one of the country’s biggest cities in the 1990s. It is hard to fathom, because it was a disgrace. Gay men were not free at home or at work. They were not protected by law. They were under sustained attack by the law.

I felt myself lucky. I had supportive friends, a loving family and a good job. I came out, and have never regretted doing so for a moment. And goodness knows, I am now a member of the gayest party in this place. [Hon. Members: “Hear, hear!”] Just look at them.

Roger Mullan (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (SNP): It’s not unanimous! [Laughter.]

John Nicolson [John Nicolson] I think a heterosexual has just come out of the closet.

Our very gayness has made Westminster the gayest Parliament in the world. [Interruption.] I am just looking at the gentleman in the wig and wondering how he is reacting. [Interruption.] He’s left, in fact.

I will never forget the men in the documentary I presented for the BBC, and their ruined lives—lives scarred by a bitter sense of injustice. When I came top of the ballot, I saw a golden opportunity. Society has moved on. We are now horrified by the inequalities of the past. We cringe when we read the homophobic rantings of some of our predecessors in this place. We believe that gay service personnel should serve, that being gay should be no bar to a career in the diplomatic service or any other service, that gay couples should be able to share a bed in a hotel, that gay kids should not be harassed and bullied at school, that chief constables should not send out officers to flirt with and entrap citizens, and that the age of consent should be equal. Looking across the House, I know that there is consensus about that in this place just as there is in society.

We do not want any of these prejudices for our future. But what about those living with unfair convictions from our past—how do we address their grievances and the injustices that they suffered? I detailed some of the cases that I covered for my documentary, and I am sure that all of us, as diligent MPs, have had mail from people who have found themselves in these circumstances. What about the men of 21 who had a boyfriend of 20 and as a result found themselves arrested, tried and convicted for under-age sex—just think about what it means to have that on your record—with a man who was perhaps only a few months younger than they were? These are people who were in a consensual relationship with a contemporary. That contemporary was old enough to serve in the military, drive a car and have a child of four legally, but was regarded by the homophobic laws of the time as a 20-year-old child unable to give consent. Those 21-year-olds have then had to endure, perhaps for decades, an unfair criminal conviction for under-age sex that may have blighted their lives.

Stonewall, the extraordinary gay rights organisation that has led the national debate on gay law reform, had a solution: the Turing Bill, named after the wartime code-breaking hero Alan Turing. Mr Turing may have been hailed by Churchill, but that did not prevent him from being charged as a homosexual and being chemically castrated. He committed suicide as a result. In his honour, Stonewall wants all gay men living with convictions for crimes that are no longer on the statute book to be pardoned. I could not think of a more noble Bill to pilot through Parliament. With old friends from all parts of the House, I felt that the Bill would attract all-party support, which indeed it has; I thank those who have supported it.

When I was approached by the Tory Whips and asked whether I would take on the Bill I was delighted to do so. The Conservative Whips asked me for a meeting and promised that if I took up the Turing Bill there would be—and I quote them exactly—“no tricks and no games from our side.”

I felt as if I was in an episode of “House of Cards”. The right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), a principled long-term campaigner for law reform, was the Justice Secretary at the time. He promised me the full support of the Justice Department.

I have worked closely with Stonewall on the Bill. Let me tell the House what the Bill does and does not do. It provides a blanket pardon for any gay man convicted of a crime that is no longer a crime. The meaning of that is patently obvious. If the crime for which someone was convicted is still a crime, by definition they are not pardoned. Let no one be confused about that.
The aim of this simple measure is, I hope, obvious. The pardon confers no immediate advantage except this: it will, I hope, bring closure to those men who have had to tell their monstrous, unfair criminal convictions for decades. They may have had to hide their conviction from family or friends; it may have prevented them from applying for a job. With my Turing Bill they get a pardon and so belated justice and the knowledge that society has acknowledged that a great wrong was committed against them.

I believe that the vast majority of gay men with convictions will be satisfied with this anonymous, private triumph, but there may be some who want something more—who feel that they should not be offered a pardon for something that was never wrong in the first place. For those men I offer an additional option, should they choose it: they will be able to have their name expunged from the records. However—and this is important, as many Members have raised the point with me—the records are often imprecise. Often there were “catch-all” arrests where the police did not specify the detail. So where the records are imprecise and where it is unclear whether the under-age party was 20, 19, 18, 17, 16—or, crucially 15 or younger—the onus will be on the applicant to prove the age of his partner at the time of the arrest.

As a result, some men might not be able to have their records expunged because they are unable to provide the necessary proof, even though their then partner was over today’s age of consent—and I recognise that that will be deeply frustrating for them. However, this provision absolutely satisfies the concerns raised that we must be rigorous in ensuring that only those who have convictions for crimes not now on the statute book benefit from these measures. All the legal advice I have taken leaves me satisfied that this Bill absolutely addresses that concern and is as watertight as it is possible to be under the circumstances.

Stonewall believes that only small numbers of men will avail themselves of this provision—the second provision of my Bill. Many of the men affected are old, and these matters are far in their past and perhaps a secret. The requirements I am imposing would be time-consuming and perhaps distressing for them to satisfy. I believe and Stonewall believes that they will be satisfied with my automatic pardon. They will not seek to have the details expunged manually from their record.

If you will forgive me, Mr Speaker, I want to come back to the promise. SNP Members may not be planning to stay in this House for very long, but other Members are passionate about Westminster and want Westminster to succeed, so surely nothing we do procedurally should bring this House into disrepute, when we know that certain words such as “filibuster” shock and horrify ordinary members of the public who think such things are appalling.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah) rose—

John Nicolson: I was hoping for an intervention, and at last one has come.

Mr Gyimah: I thank the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to intervene so early in the debate, and I congratulate him on all he is doing to raise in public the profile of this very important issue. The real question that we need to answer today is how we can deliver justice in the quickest, fairest way to those who have suffered the humiliation of conviction under archaic laws. Yesterday, the Government announced that we would answer this question with a legislative vehicle that will provide a pardon for those people within a few months. This delivers on a manifesto commitment, but it also has cross-party support. The amendment will be brought forward by a Liberal Democrat peer, and the Labour leader, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), yesterday called the move “a great victory” for all who have campaigned to right this wrong.

As well as honouring the dead, this would—[Interruption.] I would be grateful if the hon. Gentleman heard me out. As well as honouring the dead, the hon. Gentleman seeks a pardon for the living. We have developed a way to do that without giving any perception that the pardon covers perpetrators of sex with a minor or non-consensual sex.

What I would like to do today is to make a full and open offer to the hon. Gentleman to work with officials in the Ministry of Justice and the Home Office and with Stonewall to give real effect to this pardon for the dead and the living as fairly and quickly as possible. I therefore ask him to withdraw the Bill and support the amendment that has cross-party support in this House and in the other place to resolve an injustice that has been left unchallenged for too long.

John Nicolson: I thank the Minister for that, and I accepted the Government’s offer back in June. We have had plenty of time to chat about it. I have to say that standing up to propose an offer of co-operation on the very morning of my debate might be regarded as leaving it somewhat late for a further private chat. The Minister shakes his head to say that was not his offer and that he did not know anything about it, but I can assure him that I have been talking to members of the Government on and off since June.

Yesterday, the Government—the Minister has just said it—accepted an amendment to the Policing and Crime Bill in the House of Lords and claimed that it was the Turing Bill. It is not, even though some rather obliging news outlets have trumpeted their claim after reading the press releases. I will leave it to Members to decide whether it is fair to attempt to hijack my Bill some 36 hours before its Second Reading in this place.

The private Member’s Bill process is, after all, intended to allow those of us not in government to seek to leave a legacy of legislation that we believe is good, kind and worth while. I believe that this Bill is kind. The amendment accepted by the Government would, if I understand it correctly, grant an automatic pardon to the deceased, yet the Minister says he is very concerned that the Bill’s provisions would be misused because some people who have behaved improperly would get under the radar and get pardons that they were not entitled to. If he thinks it is hard to enforce that for the living, imagine how much harder it is, by his own logic, to enforce it for the dead. There is an intellectual incoherence here. The Minister can shake his head, but there is an intellectual incoherence at the heart of what the Government are proposing, and I fear that they have not really thought it through.
I know that because I have been told in the course of introducing the Bill that I would get Government support; then that I would not get it; then that I would get Government support again; and then that I might get it. I am afraid that the Conservative Government have been all over the place on this. I was very keen to avoid this becoming a party political issue. At no point have I gone to the press or given interviews in which I have referred to the Bill as an SNP measure. In fact, as the Minister knows, it is an English measure. For those who criticise the SNP and say that we are overly concerned with the constitution and Scottish issues, here is something that tackles an English injustice.

Mr Gyimah: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John Nicolson: No, I will not.

I was keen to promote this Bill on a cross-party basis, and the large number of signatories from both the Conservative party and the Labour party who wanted to support my Bill rather proves the point.

Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con): I commend the hon. Gentleman for the tone he is adopting today, but he said “English only”. Speaking as a Welsh MP, I point out that it is England and Wales. I would like to remind him of that country—tagged on, in his opinion, to England—and tease out from him what the situation is in Scotland with the Scottish Government.

John Nicolson: My humble apologies for saying “England only”. No one finds that more annoying than the Scots, so I beg the hon. Gentleman’s pardon for that. He will know, of course, that the Scottish Government have been a long-term champion of gay rights. The country has become famous for the progress it has made on this issue. I remember a time when we were told by opponents of devolution that we should not have a Scottish Parliament because we relied on Westminster to keep us liberal. That was an old argument that I remember from the 1970s: we needed English and Welsh MPs to keep us on the right side of liberal law reform, otherwise we would be a religious puppet state—a sort of Presbyterian Iran. I like to think that the progress we have made since Holyrood came into being has rather shown that we have a good record on this issue.

To address the hon. Gentleman’s point, I have had discussions with Scottish Ministers. There is, of course, widespread welcome in Scotland for this legislation, and it is my belief that Holyrood would enact something very similar in due course.

Mr Gyimah: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John Nicolson: No, I will not.

Let us focus exactly on what it is that the amendment that the Minister mentioned does. The amendment accepted by the Government would grant an automatic pardon to the deceased. Of course that is great, and my Bill makes the same provision, but I have to ask the House: should we not prioritise the living over the dead?

I wonder whether Members spotted an elderly gentleman who toured the TV and radio studios yesterday. He is a 93-year-old who feels immensely strongly—[Interruption.] No, no one on the Labour Benches. This was somebody different who toured the TV studios talking about the injustice that he feels about his criminal convictions. He has tagged himself “the oldest gay in the village” on Twitter. He is 93, and he says that he is determined to live to 100 to see justice served, because he has lived with a sense of injustice for all these years.

Mr Gyimah: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

John Nicolson: I am going to make progress.

How odd would it look for the elderly to be told that they must wait until they die for the automatic pardon that the Government now seem to be proposing? Let us finish the law reform that we have started by recognising that the victims of society’s prejudices are still hurting, and are still alive. They deserve the peace that the Bill would bring. [Applause]

10 am

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): Our history is littered with minority groups who have been caught up in illegal acts in the past, under laws that we consider today to be quite unbelievable, and also discriminatory. We cannot imagine such laws now, because morality and ethics have changed beyond all recognition since those bygone eras. There is a string of moral and ethical subjects that we cannot imagine criminalising, although in some parts of the United Kingdom they are still criminal offences.

As recently as April this year, a young woman in Northern Ireland could not afford the fare to England for an abortion and, in desperation, took abortion pills which she had bought online and performed a self-abortion. Under Northern Irish law, she was arrested, charged, sentenced to three months in jail suspended for two years, and finally criminalised. She was convicted in Belfast High Court under ancient laws that had come into force under Queen Victoria, but still sit on the statute book of Northern Ireland.

Prostitution is another moral subject in respect of which, historically and today, a great deal of ambiguity surrounds what is and is not illegal. Having moved away from one stereotype—that of the disreputable woman as a seller of sexual services—we now view the prostitute as a vulnerable, exploited victim. The laws relating to prostitution in England and Wales are far from straightforward. The act of prostitution is not in itself illegal, but a string of laws criminalises activities connected with it. It is an offence, for example, to cause or incite prostitution, or control it for personal gain. The Sexual Offences Act 1956 bans the running of a brothel. If more than one person—the law is gender-neutral—is available on premises for paid sex, those premises are a brothel.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): May I correct the hon. Gentleman slightly? There is no definition of a brothel in law. Common law allows the courts to determine that a brothel is a place frequented by men to perform lewd homosexual practices including dancing, and the term has often been used in that sense. There is still plenty on the statute book that needs to be reformed.

Craig Whittaker: The hon. Gentleman makes my point eloquently. The law relating to prostitution is so ambiguous that it is easy to see how people can be charged with offences that we consider ridiculous nowadays.
Whether or not one is morally opposed to some of these acts is not the issue. A progressive Government, in a modern-day democracy, will continue to consider all the issues and debate them openly. As a Conservative, I am proud that some progressive laws have been introduced under successive Conservative Governments. The decriminalisation of homosexuality is one example: it was Churchill’s Government who commissioned the Wolfenden report in the late 1950s. That was by no means a turning point in history, but it was the start of a lengthy process to put right a great wrong.

It would be easy to argue—as I am sure many of my colleagues will—that a crime is a crime, and that that was the law of the land at the time. So why are we considering pardons for laws that our forefathers thought were apt for the time? Why should we feel guilty on behalf of past law-makers who, like us, made laws and passed legislation that fitted the mood and the times of that particular day? Why should there be a pardon for gay and bisexual men when there are so many other historical moral issues that could easily be subjected to the same argument?

For me, the answer has to be the police. We all know that, historically, we have seen our police forces operate in a way that has sometimes not been totally honest, open or above board. We need only recall what happened at Hillsborough, not to mention the cases of abuse that have been swept under the carpet. Even today, many Members still come across cases in respect of which we cannot help questioning the ethos of our local police forces, knowing full well what has gone on historically. When it comes to criminal convictions for homosexuality, it does not take too long to trawl the internet and see what was common practice on the part of local police forces in years gone by.

In 1958, a public lavatory used for cottaging in Bolton—not a million miles from my constituency—was well known to police and magistrates, but there had not been a conviction for 30 years. However, there would be intermittent trawls through the address books of suspected homosexuals, with the result that up to 20 men at a time would appear in the dock, accused of being a “homosexual ring”, although many of them might never have met each other before. In one case, there had been no public sex, no under-age sex and no multiple sex, yet the men were all dragged to court, and a 21-year-old who was considered to be the ringleader was sentenced to 21 months in jail. Interestingly, an issue of the Bolton News contained five letters in support of the convicted men and none against them. The deputy editor was visited by the local police, who wanted to know whether he really believed that this was what the people of Bolton thought about the enforcement of the law.

In the mid-1950s, there was the atmosphere of a witch-hunt—probably not unrelated to what was happening in America with McCarthy—and there were consequent opportunities for blackmail. A chap called Leo Abse, who eventually piloted the Sexual Offences Act 1967 through this very Parliament, recalled that, when he was a lawyer in Cardiff, all his fees from criminals suddenly started coming from the account of one man. He investigated, and found that the man was “a poor vicar.” The criminals were bleeding him dry through blackmail.

Members of Parliament on both sides of the House began to demand action, and one or two newspapers ran leaders. Then there was another high-profile case, in which the police were called to deal with one matter and ended up prosecuting for another. Edward Montagu, later Lord Beaulieu, contacted the police over a stolen camera, and ended up in prison for a year for gross indecency. Two of his friends, Michael Pitt-Rivers and Peter Wildblood, got 18 months. Their trial in 1954 probably influenced the decision of the then Home Secretary, David Maxwell-Fyfe, to establish the Wolfenden committee to consider whether a change in the law was necessary.

Should men like those be pardoned? Of course they should. The police and magistrates clearly abused their powers to instil fear and practise entrapment. The question for us today, however, is whether we should support the Bill or wait for the Government amendment to the Policing and Crime Bill. This Bill proposes a blanket pardon for the living without the need to go through what is known as the disregard process. The Government amendment is exactly the same, but would mean that the living would have to go through the disregard process.

Mr Gyimah: We already prioritise the living, notwithstanding what was said by the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson). They can go through the disregard process and be given a statutory pardon at the end of it. What is important is the safeguard that prevents someone who has had sex with a minor from receiving a blanket pardon and then, for example, going to work in a school.

Craig Whittaker: I thank my hon. Friend for that clarification. He has taken two paragraphs out of my speech. One reason why I cannot support this private Member’s Bill is that, despite what the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson) claims, I do not believe that it is watertight. People could claim to have been cleared of certain offences when in fact those offences are still crimes. Such offences include having sex with a minor and non-consensual sexual activity.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I am sure that the hon. Gentleman prepared for the debate today by reading the Bill. He will be aware that clause 1, which sets out the effect of the legislation, states:

“Nothing in this Act is to be interpreted as pardoning, disregarding or in any other way affecting cautions, convictions, sentences or any other consequences of convictions or cautions for conduct or behaviour that is unlawful on the date that the Act comes into force.”

What is unclear about that?

Craig Whittaker: I hear clearly what the hon. and learned Lady says, but my big concern is: how do we physically check the process? The disregard process will do just that. I have already said there are a lot of men who clearly should be pardoned, and that there should be a process for doing that, but how do we physically check the process? The disregard process is there for that exact purpose.

Mike Weir (Angus) (SNP): Did the hon. Member not listen to my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson) explaining this? Anyone wanting to go through this process will have to prove the age of the other party involved in the incident that led to the conviction. My hon. Friend conceded that
that could be very difficult in some cases, and many people will find it impossible, given the state of the records. However, it is a safeguard against the very issue that the hon. Gentleman is talking about.

Craig Whittaker: I do not agree that it is a safeguard. If we give a blanket pardon, where are the safeguards in that process? We already have a disregard process in the system, and it is important that we should have these safeguards in place. It is still an offence in this country to have underage sex, and given the issues around safeguarding children in our schools, it is vital that we have those safeguards in place. I have every sympathy with the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire’s Bill, but I will not be supporting it. I will, however, support the Government’s amendment to the Policing and Crime Bill, because it is incredibly important that we have safeguards in any process that we put in place. I believe that disregarding the disregard process would be the wrong thing to do.

10.12 am

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): I warmly congratulate the whole Scottish National party on turning up today to support the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson), who has put forward his argument extremely well. It is strange, living in this world today and looking around this country, to see how much has changed so very rapidly. Young people at school today are not ashamed of owning up to being gay, lesbian, bisexual or whatever. Every one of us who goes into a secondary school today will probably see kids who are happy to do that. When most of us went to school, there was probably nobody in that category at all.

Civil partnerships and same-sex marriage have made an enormous difference to the way in which the whole of society looks at homosexuality. Many children in primary school will know other kids who have gay parents. Either because they have been adopted or surrogated or in some other set of circumstances, they will have ended up having two dads or two mums. That is not an uncommon experience for many youngsters growing up today, and I hope that the future will be even warmer than that.

I do not think that any employer in Britain today would think it right to sack somebody just because of their sexuality. As the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire said, it is a delight that that now applies to our armed forces and to the police. I remember that Ministers were making complicated decisions only a short time ago about whether to allow members of the armed forces to march in gay pride marches in uniform. That debate seems bizarrely outdated nowadays. There is a phenomenal sense that we have made enormous achievements and great strides in this country.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that much of the progress in the change in attitudes towards gay and lesbian people in society has come from the media and how gay and lesbian people are portrayed in soap operas? I understand that the House is about to be joined by a former actress from “Coronation Street”, and I offer the gay vicar character from that soap opera as an example. This has all helped to change the way in which gay and lesbian people are portrayed.

Chris Bryant: I think that media portrayals have been a double-edged sword, to be honest. I am slightly sick of the fact that quite often the gay character in a crime drama will be the murderer, for example. Larry Grayson and John Inman have already been mentioned. John Inman always maintained that his character in “Are You Being Served?” was not gay, and it is true that the campest people I know are all heterosexual men. But, yes, it did matter when Michael Cushman’s character kissed another man in “EastEnders”. That was a change-making moment, and I think that British society might have moved on faster because of our broadcasters, partly through Mrs Thatcher’s creation of Channel 4, which was given the role of being edgy and different. Those factors made it possible for us to make great strides very fast. It does not always work like that, however. I am still mystified why Australia, which seems to be the campest nation on Earth—it is obsessed with Abba—still does not have any form of legalised gay relationships. I very much hope that that is going to change soon, and I shall say more about that in a moment.

I remember the rows, during my time as an MP, when the House of Lords refused to vote for an equal age of consent or to get rid of section 28. We had to use the Parliament Acts to push that measure through. More recently, however, more Conservative Members of the House of Lords voted for same-sex marriage than did Conservative Members of this House. There has been a phenomenal change, and I delight in that fact.

I remember a row in this House about whether we should ban discrimination against gay couples in the provision of goods and services, including adoption services. I was struck by the Catholic Church’s argument at the time that it was fine for an individual gay person to adopt a child but not for a gay couple to do so. In the Church’s mind, a settled relationship was a more dangerous place for a child than being with a single gay person. I just did not understand that logic. The truth of the matter is that many of the most difficult-to-place kids are placed with gay and lesbian couples. I am glad that, in the end, this House and House of Lords wholeheartedly endorsed the idea that there should be no discrimination in the provision of goods and services.

Not everything is perfect, however. Bullying in many different forms is still a fundamental problem in schools, for example, and it is very difficult to eradicate. As the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire said, one aspect of that bullying is related to sexuality. The word “gay” is all too often used pejoratively, and schools sometimes have difficulty in dealing with these issues. My husband Jared is a trustee of a charity called Diversity Role Models, which goes into schools to help them to talk through these issues. It is a phenomenal shame that we still do not have proper sex and relationship education in every school in this land without any school being able to opt out. Such education can result in most kids delaying their first sexual experience, which helps to cut the level of teenage pregnancy. It is better for everyone all round when there is proper sex and relationship education.
I cannot remember whether I am slightly older or slightly younger than the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire—

**John Nicolson:** Older.

**Chris Bryant:** I see that the hon. Gentleman is in his usual magnanimous mood. Being slightly older, then, I have even more experience and wisdom to impart to him.

I remember that one of my first experiences on coming to London was meeting a couple called Christopher and Illyd, who had lived together in a one-bedroom flat since the 1950s. Just after I first met them, one of them was attacked on the way home, sustaining many injuries, some of which they worried would be permanent. The guy had insisted on coming into the house and had burgled them at knife point. What was striking about their story was that they could go neither to the hospital nor to the police because they were two men living in a one-bedroom flat and that was a criminal offence under the law of the land. They knew that they would not get justice despite what had happened to them. There are countless thousands of others to whom that situation applied.

I remember a case involving two of my friends at university. I was sort of straight at the time—/[Interruption./] I am a practising homosexual now, and one day I will be quite good at it. Incidentally, I was also a sort of Conservative at the time, but we will not go into all that—many, many sins. My friends—two 19-year-old men—got into trouble with the university police because they had had sex and that was a criminal offence at the time because they were under 21. A college room was not a private place under the law and the two were sent down, receiving a criminal conviction and never finishing their degrees.

Until the Sexual Offences Act 2003, importuning was illegal in this country. Importuning is a strange word. It was used by the police for many convictions right up until 2003. If a man met somebody in a bar whom they did not know before and went home with them, that was importuning and he could be sent down for it. If the police could not secure a conviction for something else, they often relied on importuning to bring a charge.

Many people hid their sexuality for the simple reason that they were terrified of being sacked or not being promoted. I pay tribute to John Major, who I think was quite good at it. Incidentally, I was also a sort of powder puff in his pocket, but he was sent to prison for three months and did hard labour. The only evidence that he had his mother’s powder puff in his pocket, but he was sent to prison for three months. I am so proud that the MP for Rhondda West at the time, a miner called William John, gave evidence on behalf of the young man, but the court did not listen.

**Margaret Ferrier** (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): We have made great strides towards equality, but we still live with the legacy of antiquated legislation. We need only to look at certain Commonwealth countries for examples. In some cases, the anti-gay laws are mirror copies of those that existed here. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that if we are to start making reparations for this wrongdoing in addition to pardoning those who were convicted, we must seek to influence other members of the Commonwealth where gay men and women do not enjoy the freedom to be who they are?

**Chris Bryant:** Yes, I wholeheartedly agree. Indeed, when I was a Foreign Office Minister for about two and a half seconds—

**Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): Too long!

**Chris Bryant:** Far too long. I tried to push forward some of these issues. The Foreign Office can play an important role around the world in tackling abuse in countries as diverse as Iran and Russia. I say to my Australian colleagues, “For heaven’s sake, just get your act together.” They should join the company of nations that have changed. If Argentina can have gay marriage, if Spain—so dominated, historically, by Catholicism—can have gay marriage, why on earth cannot Australia, the country of “Priscilla, Queen of the Desert”? We are debating today one of the worst periods in our history. In the 1870s and 1880s a series of scurrilous and horrible newspapers whipped up deliberate hysteria around homosexuality. It led to the Criminal Law Amendment Act 1885, a serious piece of legislation that tried to tackle the problem of under-age women being abused in the prostitution trade. Henry Labouchere introduced a clause that I want to read out so that people realise how pernicious the legislation was. It stated:

> “Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or is a party to the commission of, or procures, or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency with an other male person, shall be guilty of a misdemeanour, and being convicted thereof shall be liable at the discretion of the Court to be imprisoned for any term not exceeding two years, with or without hard labour.”

It could not have been made more wide reaching:

> “in public or private commits, or is a party to the commission of, or procures, or attempts to procure”.

Any court would be able to interpret the legislation as it felt fit. The final line about “hard labour” is, famously, partly what ended up killing Oscar Wilde. The legislation led to thousands of people being sent to prison and doing hard labour.

There was a campaign in the 1920s to try to rid the country of this “scourge”. A young lad from the Rhondda, a railway porter called Thomas, was caught by the police outside the Tivoli theatre, and they tried to do him for gross indecency. He was sent to prison for three months and did hard labour. The only evidence that they had to advance was that he had his mother’s powder puff in his pocket, but he was sent to prison for three months. I am so proud that the MP for Rhondda West at the time, a miner called William John, gave evidence on behalf of the young man, but the court did not listen.
We find the same things all over again in the 1950s. David Maxwell Fyfe, the then Home Secretary, was wonderful as one of the inquisitors at Nuremberg and in helping to draft the European convention on human rights, but he was shockingly homophobic and forced the Home Office and the police to run a campaign to rid this country of the “scourge”, as he put it, of homosexuality. One of the terrible ironies for him was that two of the first people trapped were Conservative Members of Parliament.

I listened to what the Minister said, but there is a real problem about trying to force people to go through another process. For someone now in their 70s or 80s, the conviction might have been like a brand on them for their entire life. It might have caused terrible problems in their family life. It might have meant that they were never able to do the job that they wanted to do, such as a teacher not being able to go back to teaching. Friends and relatives might have shunned them. It might have made them feel terribly ashamed. Why on earth would they want to write to the Home Secretary, asking, “Please may I be pardoned?” Why on earth would they want to go through that process all over again? Why on earth would they want someone to analyse whether they were guilty of something way back when?

The Minister made a good argument about our working together, but the way to work together is to agree to the Bill. We can then go into Committee and if things need to be put right, let us put them right. The hon. Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker) said that this Bill is not watertight. I say to him: let us make it watertight. The place to do that is in Committee, rather than by turning our back today.

Several hon. Members referred to the fact this might be called the Turing Bill, but I do not want to call it that; I want to call it the Cartland, Macnamara, Muirhead, Bernays, Cazalet Bill. At the start of the 1930s, many MPs and politicians in this country, most of them Conservative—there were not many Labour MPs in the early 1930s—were convinced that Germany was a good country, because it had very liberal attitudes towards homosexuality. Berlin in the early 1930s was one of the best places for a gay man to live—we can think of Christopher Isherwood, “Cabaret” and all the rest of it. One of those MPs was Jack Macnamara, who was elected for Chelmsford in 1935; another was Robert Bernays, a Liberal who had been elected in 1931; and a third was Ronald Cartland, who was elected for Birmingham King’s Norton. They changed their minds when they saw what was happening to homosexuals in 1930s Germany. Originally, they had thought that the Versailles treaty was unfair to Germany and it should be overturned, and that Germany should be able to remilitarise the Rhineland and to change its future. In 1936 Jack Macnamara visited the Rhineland, expressly to support its remilitarisation. When he was there he “accidentally”—that was his word—visited a concentration camp: Dachau, which was the only one that existed at the time. The people who were in Dachau were the politically unwanted—a lot of Jews and some homosexuals. He saw the violence that was being perpetrated against them, and when he came back to this country he and others became the most vociferous campaigners against appeasement in this House.

Robert Bernays, Jack Macnamara, Anthony Muirhead, a junior Minister, Victor Cazalet, Philip Sassoon, Harold Nicolson and Ronald Tree were gay or bisexual, and they campaigned vociferously in this Chamber and around. They campaigned against Jew-baiting. Jack Macnamara made a speech in here about Jew-baiting and was spat at that evening when he went to the Carlton club—he never went back. Ronald Cartland, the younger brother of Barbara Cartland, was probably the most courageous in the Munich debates, saying that it was terrible that we should capitulate and appease Hitler.

What did the then Government do? What did Neville Chamberlain’s cronies do? They called these men the “glamour boys”. They got newspapers to ring them up and ask why they were still not married and why they were bachelors. They had these men’s telephones tapped and had them followed, and when these MPs made speeches, they threatened them with deselection—and yet they persisted. It is my very strong belief that had it not been for those gay and bisexual men, we would never have faced down Hitler and we would not enjoy today the freedoms that we do.

I mention some of those names because of their shields up here in the Chamber. Jack Macnamara desperately wanted to fight in the second world war, because he said, “I’ve argued for this war, I should fight.” Although Macnamara he had been in the Army before he came into the House, Churchill wanted him to serve in some capacity on the home front, and not overseas. Jack Macnamara got his mother to write to Churchill, month after month after month, until eventually he was given a posting in the Adriatic and he saw service. He was killed when the Germans bombarded him and his troops in Italy.

Ronald Cartland was disabled and failed his first medical test, but he managed to persuade somebody to perform another one and he was drafted. He was sent to France in early 1940. He and his troops were holding the fort at Cassel, in the triangle between Calais and Dunkirk, and he was one of the last people out of the fort. They kept on for four more days than they should have done for their own protection, so that thousands more British troops could escape from Dunkirk and Calais. As they left Cassel, it was one of the very few times when the commanding officer in the British armed forces actually said, “Every man for himself.” He was killed on the route back to Dunkirk.

Anthony Muirhead, whose shield is just above us, committed suicide just after the war had started. It is often said that he did so because he was not able to fight, but I suspect it was actually because the newspapers were pursing him about his private life.

Robert Bernays, the Liberal MP for Bristol North, was killed in a plane crash over the Adriatic, again in military service.

Victor Cazalet, the MP for Chippenham, died in an air crash. He had become a close friend of the free Poles and died in the air crash along with General Sikorski.

We, as a country, owe not only those people, but so many other men, since the Labouchere amendment, something that feels like an apology—something that really says, “I am sorry we got this wrong. You were brave, courageous men. We got it wrong. You were right. We owe you a debt of gratitude.” [Applause.]
10.35 am

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): It is of course a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). As a former sort of straight Conservative, we at least appear to have been on half a journey together. No one can doubt the wider case he made for the Bill. On the narrow point he made about the Bill, I entirely agree with him and want to come back to it in the course of my remarks. The emotion with which he presented his case was also more than exemplified by the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson), whose speech was characteristic of his usual brilliant self, as one would expect of a world debating champion; I first came across him when I was president of the Durham union society, a horribly long time ago, and his words were both powerful and emotional. He, like the hon. Member for Rhondda, introduced the wider case and the wider background to the Bill, and why this issue matters so much, particularly to the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community.

Let me turn to the narrow issue of the Bill, as I wish to confine my remarks to that. The royal pardon given to Dr Alan Turing in December 2013 was widely welcomed as helping to put right the injustice he suffered by being convicted of “gross indecency” in 1952 and the subsequent physical and emotional damage he endured through chemical castration, which led to his suicide. It is true that that posthumous pardon changed the precedent for the exercise of the royal prerogative of mercy. As the Government of the day stated: “A pardon is only normally granted when the person is innocent of the offence and where a request has been made by someone with a vested interest such as a family member. Uniquely on this occasion a pardon has been issued without either requirement being met, reflecting the exceptional nature of Alan Turing’s achievements”.

Towerimg though Alan Turing’s achievements were—and we should all continue to pay tribute to them—the wrongs done to thousands of gay men, which we recognise today as human rights abuses, are no less in need of being corrected. The hurt, pain and injustice is no different for all these people. The exceptionality of Alan Turing’s achievements was the one that he chose to bring to the House, and he would have wished to introduce. We had several conversations about different ideas that he had, and this was the one that he chose to bring to the House, and he is to be enormously congratulated on that.

Although a welcome step, that approach ties the pardon to the process of disregarding convictions from criminal records that already exists and would be extended by clause 3. There need not be such a link. The Government can be more generous. They can make a distinction between the powerful symbolic effect of the general pardon to men—some alive, many dead—and the mechanism by which individuals can benefit from the practical effects of a pardon through the disregard process. This, therefore, ensures that criminal offences that remain criminal offences today are not included in any practical consequences of the pardon. I know that the Minister will present a marginally different view and different concerns, but that discussion should be had at the Committee stage of this Bill. If the Government are not satisfied with the discussion in Committee then this Bill will not make progress towards becoming an Act.

I assume that the sponsors of the Bill are pleased that the Government have at least moved some of the way in their proposal. Even if they were not to move further I would argue that this Bill is a better vehicle for the Sharkey amendment than a rather anonymous amendment within the latest Policing and Crime Bill, which roll off the statute book year after year and would not have the symbolic effects that this Act of Parliament would have. Of course that is the point. This Bill and our debate is at least as much about symbolic restitution and a righting of historic wrongs as of process. The measures adopted, whether the narrower version currently favoured by the Government or the broader approach in this Bill as it is today, would stand much better as a symbol in a stand-alone Act. I hope that a way can be found to use the Bill of the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire as the vehicle by which we can make this clear statement of today’s values of today’s Parliament.

10.42 am

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to star in another episode of “Carry on up the Commons”, which is what it has been like in here this morning.

It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson). I do not call him my honourable friend just to obey the conventions of the House. I say it because he is both honourable and a true friend. What a piece of legislation he has brought to the House. It is the first ever SNP private Member’s Bill—an historic moment no less—although he does not wish to present it as such, and I agree with that.

In his remarks, my hon. Friend referred to his time with Edwina Currie in Amsterdam. I urge all Members when they get the chance—perhaps outside the Chamber—to ask him about the stilettos disappearing up the stairs. I seem to remember him saying “from a room with very few lights.” I will leave it to him to develop that further.

When my hon. Friend was called to introduce a Bill, he was top of the ballot. I confess to feeling just a tiny bit of seething jealousy on that morning as I opened my Twitter account on my iPad to see him No. 1 on the ballot. Had it been me, this is exactly the Bill that I would have wished to introduce. We had several conversations about different ideas that he had, and this was the one that he chose to bring to the House, and he is to be enormously congratulated on that.
What a forensic speech from the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). It was an historical speech, and referred to the shields of previous hon. Members in this House, and he is to be thanked because we are better informed as a result of his remarks.

I want to share one or two stories from constituents of mine, whom I shall not name. One of them is quite well known in left-wing circles in Scottish politics. This took place at a time when there were no LGBT centres, no gay bars, and no places where the gay community could go to socialise. It often meant that they had to socialise at home—having parties in friends’ houses and such. He told me about one particular party in Rutherglen. It was held in a flat that had become the place to which they would go. My hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) claims from a sedentary position, that she was not there. This was in the 1960s. The neighbours at the time had cottoned on to the fact that there were these devious homosexual men and women having a party—I should break it to some people that when we homosexuals have a party, it is just like any other party only much more fun. At the party, there would have been music, laughter, gossip, dancing, singing and perhaps even a wee drink or two. When the neighbours cottoned on to the fact that the flat was full of homosexuals, they would call the police. The police would then visit the flat—no crime having been committed and no antisocial behaviour having taken place—and take the names and addresses of every person there, asking why they were there and intimidating them.

When my constituent saw the police coming up the stairs, he decided that he was not going to stay in the room. As he could not exactly leave by the front door, he decided to hang out of the window—from the second room. As he could not exactly leave by the front door, he decided that he was not going to stay in the house; I would never have that clash of a yellow lanyard here; I would never have that clash of a yellow lanyard with a purple tie—and I have seen him in worse as well. Such is the ingenuity of good Glaswegians, they thought to themselves, “Should this ever happen again, we need to have a plan.” They decided to borrow—not to steal—the choir books from the Rutherglen parish church, so that if the police were to come back, the music could be switched off, the drinks could be put away and all they would be confronted with is the Rutherglen parish church choir singing “Kumbayah”.

### John Nicolson: You haven’t been to church recently, have you?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I should say that God is always surprised to see me when I attend prayers in this House.

Although we laugh, that is what people were going through, and much, much worse has been adumbrated to the House by other Members. Things have moved on remarkably, but even through the 1980s, friends of mine talk about going to pride parades in London where the streets would be lined with police looking as though they were expecting some kind of violent protest. In a magnificent act of defiance, a friend of mine tied a pink balloon to the strap of his bag, so that it would bounce off the noses of the police officers as he marched down the street.

Look at us now—out and proud. There is not a Member here—certainly not on the SNP Benches—who is not desperate to be associated with the progress in gay rights. It is now very popular to be in favour of equality, but it did not use to be. What this Bill seeks to do is right the wrong. I should just say that the Government and the House are not doing us a favour by doing this: equal marriage was not a favour and equality of adoption rights was not a favour. It is about correcting our mistakes of the past.

Imagine you are a young person thinking of coming out, Mr Deputy Speaker. It is 6 o’clock and you turn on your computer or iPad and across your Twitter timeline comes the story of how today’s vote goes. Imagine if the House declined the opportunity to pass this Bill; how would that make you feel? What kind of signal does it send to young people across this country and around the world if we decline to pass this Bill today?

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: Certainly; one young man to another.

Alan Brown: A gay man to a straight man. Does my hon. Friend agree that the message coming from some in other parties is that living homosexuals could still be at risk of being classified as a paedophile? That is the message if we reject this Bill.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I should also clarify that I am the gay man here; I would never have that clash of a yellow lanyard with a purple tie—and I have seen him in worse as well. The 16,000 people the hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) mentioned, and many others, are the giants on whose shoulders we stand. Today we have an opportunity to do the right thing. Symbolism is important in this; rather than have some anonymous technical amendment in that place along the corridor—which is even more camp than this place—a Bill is important. Where there are concerns, genuine or otherwise, the Committee is the place to strengthen the Bill, otherwise what is this place for—a question I find myself asking quite a lot, actually?

What I think we all want today is for young people to read about and watch this debate, and see this Bill pass. That would send a strong and positive message that it is indeed okay to be gay.

10.52 am

Nick Herbert (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I understand that an urgent question has been tabled for 11 o’clock so I will endeavour to be brief so my remarks do not become truncated.

First, I want to congratulate the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson) on introducing this measure and on his excellent speech in support of his Bill. I welcome what he has sought to do.

There is general agreement in this House that great injustice was done to gay men in the past by laws that have since been repealed. There is a great deal of regret for that injustice and a recognition that there are people
who are still alive who have suffered as a consequence of it. Further to that, there is broad, although perhaps not unanimous, agreement that it is right that not only should that legislation have been repealed, in many cases some time ago, but that this House and the Government should go further and extend a pardon to those convicted of offences we now believe should not have been criminal offences, because of the enormous injustice done to them. It seems to me that there is no disagreement between the Government and Members on the Opposition and Government Benches who believe it is right in principle for such a pardon to be extended.

I recall being a Minister in the Ministry of Justice along with my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) at the time when we were discussing the initial proposal that a specific pardon should be granted to Alan Turing. We had those discussions with my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), who was then the Justice Secretary. One can hardly imagine a more humane or liberal Member of Parliament than my right hon. and learned Friend, but he had concerns about the possible implications of the further application of the principle we were embarking on. I think those were legitimate concerns, and I think there is a legitimate debate to be had about the extent to which it is possible to embark on a process of revisionism such that we find ourselves extending a general apology or pardon for all sorts of crimes that may have been committed a while ago and for legislation that was enacted before our time.

Members on both sides of the House have spoken with passion about why we should offer a signal or expression of regret. It is clearly important for the living that the state recognises the injustice that was done, but it is also important to a broader community. The hon. Members for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) spoke powerfully about that. That is important because, in spite of the near completion of the legislative agenda, in this country at least, to ensure full equality for gay people, there is still discrimination in our society, and particularly in our schools, where there are young people who face prejudice and are worried that they may not be accepted in our society. Therefore, the signals this House and the Government send are immensely important.

There is also the question of the signal we send more widely to the rest of the world. I am honoured to be the elected chairman of the all-party group on global lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender rights, and the hon. Member for Glasgow South is also an officer of that group. We focus on the appalling breaches of human rights increasingly being perpetrated in other countries around the world where human rights are going backwards, not forwards; gay people are living and working in fear in, for instance, countries in sub-Saharan Africa and in Russia and other countries in eastern Europe. In those countries, progress needs to be made to secure equality and a respect for human rights. We are often told—as are those who are victimised in those countries—that their laws historically owe their origin to this place, to laws fashioned and promoted by this Parliament as part of our Empire.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Is that not why it is so utterly important that this Bill goes through in its own right to send out that message, rather than have just a few lines of an amendment?

Nick Herbert: The hon. Lady anticipates what I am about to say. I was explaining that I believe it is important that this House sends the right signal with a general pardon because of the effect on the living, because of those to whom an injustice has been done, because of the way in which young people in particular may anticipate how they will be treated, and because of the signal we might therefore send globally about the importance of standing up for human rights.

Mr Gyimah: The amendment that will be tabled by Lord Sharkey is not just a few lines in a Bill. Lord Sharkey is one of the most prominent campaigners on this issue: he has been campaigning for a long time, and yesterday’s announcement has already garnered global headlines and will continue to do so when the amendment is passed.

Nick Herbert: I had said I hoped to complete my remarks by 11 o’clock, but I can now see that that is not going to be possible, because what I want to say about the position of the Government and my hon. Friend the Minister is important, and it is important that we get a resolution to this matter. Whatever the history of the last few days, it seems to me—this was the point I was trying to make at the beginning of my speech—that there is broad agreement on the necessity of this measure, the value of it and the importance of proceeding. Indeed, there is a Conservative manifesto commitment to do so. After I resume my speech—as I hope I will be able to, Mr Deputy Speaker—I would like to explain why I therefore believe the Bill should be allowed a Second Reading.

Proceedings interrupted (Standing Order No. 11(4)).
Child Refugees: Age Checks

11 am

**Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con) [*Urgent Question*]: To ask the Minister for Immigration if he will make a statement on what age checks are being carried out on child refugees to ensure they are children.

**The Minister for Immigration** (*Mr Robert Goodwill*): I thank my hon. Friend for tabling this urgent question, which enables us to put the Government’s position on the record.

I can reassure my hon. Friend that we work closely with the French authorities to ensure that the cases applying to come to the UK qualify under Dublin, including in terms of conducting an age assessment where necessary. All individuals are referred to the UK authorities by France terre d’asile—the FTDA, which is a non-governmental organisation—and are then interviewed by French and UK officials. Where credible and clear documentary evidence of age is not available—the pace at which these children have fled situations of war and persecution means that many do not have any definitive documentary evidence—then we will use criteria, including physical appearance and demeanour, to assess age as part of the interview process.

My officials are working in difficult circumstances in Calais to ensure that vulnerable children are safeguarded. There has been significant media coverage over the last week questioning the appearance of those admitted to the UK. I think we would all agree that teenagers’ appearances vary widely, and my officials and all the agencies working in these difficult circumstances have the safety and welfare of the young people in mind.

This week has also reopened the old debate about the value of dental X-rays and medical tests to determine an individual’s age. A significant number of experts have spoken out against such checks. The British Dental Association has described them as “inaccurate, inappropriate and unethical”. The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health has said that the margin of error can sometimes be as much as five years either side with medical tests and Doctors of the World UK has called the idea “unethical and unnecessary”. That is why the Home Office does not use dental X-rays to confirm the ages of those seeking asylum in the UK. The House should also note that, legally, we cannot confirm the ages of those seeking asylum in the UK.

**Philip Davies**: I am grateful to the Minister, for whom I have a great deal of respect and admiration, for that statement.

Surely it cannot be necessary to explain why it is important that child refugees are actually children. We agreed to take in child refugees, so surely it is not too much to ask that the Government ensure that they are children. But clearly this is not the case: people only have to see the pictures of the so-called child refugees to see that many of them are not children. The Home Office has admitted that two thirds of people claiming to be child refugees are shown to be not children. Even the charities have had to accept this, trying to explain that people who are clearly older were translators, only to be told that they were not translators at all, but were claiming to be child refugees. A large number of my constituents have contacted me to say how angry they are that we are being taken for fools and taken for a ride, and that our generosity is being abused. Does the Minister not understand that unless a grip is taken on this, it will do irreparable damage to public confidence in the asylum system?

The Minister has said that carrying out dental checks would be not only unethical but unreliable. However, the Government’s own website, in the UK Visas and Immigration section on “Assessing age”, under “Dental age assessments or x-ray reports”, says:

“In some instances, applicants will submit reports from dental consultants based on a detailed assessment of dental development. The margin of error in determining age through this process is approximately plus or minus 2 years.”

and prays in aid the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health. It continues:

“This means there will be cases where such reports should be given considerable weight—for example because the applicant’s claimed age is within the possible range.”

The Home Office is already saying on its website that dental checks should be given considerable weight. How on earth can they be unreliable and unethical in this case, when they are being touted on the Government’s website as sensible? What checks are being made by the Government?

Finally, if somebody claims to be 14, do we just accept it and send them to a local school, with all the obvious safeguarding issues that would be involved if they were adults? The Government owe the British public and genuine child refugees a promise to get a grip on this situation.

**Mr Goodwill**: My hon. Friend needs to be aware that both the Dublin regulation and section 67 of the Immigration Act 2016—the so-called Dubs amendment—define children as those under the age of 18. Indeed, a large number of those in the camps are both male and 16 or 17-year-olds, and we have never tried to mislead anyone about that particular fact.

The criterion being used at this stage for the Dublin children is family connections in the UK. Those children are our priority and they are the ones we have seen being brought across this week. Further children will be brought across, and some of that initial assessment will enable further work to be done, including fingerprinting. If there are cases where, for example, the person concerned has been brought to the attention of a European immigration authority or has applied for a visa somewhere in the world to come to the UK, we will be able to have further information, so that work is being done.

The age issue can arise because of Home Office concerns about the claimed age or because the individual does not accept the initial assessment process. Where there is doubt, the individual will be referred to a local authority children’s services department for a careful,
case-law compliant age assessment and will be treated as a child while the outcome is awaited. Local authorities have a statutory duty to ensure that they safeguard and promote the welfare of children under section 11 of the Children Act 2004, regardless of their immigration status or nationality. This safeguards the individual who is required to undergo an age assessment and safeguards children already in the care population from the presence of an adult being placed in the same living accommodation.

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I want to start by welcoming all refugees who have entered Britain in the last few days to their new home. I hope that our country will provide them with a safe space that enables them to put behind them the traumas and difficulties they have faced. Welcome to Britain.

The Government committed to taking unaccompanied child refugees in May. The Home Office have therefore had five months to assess the age of the young people—five months in which refugees have had to live their lives in limbo and in conditions that none of us would like to live in, and certainly not to have our children live in. I am sure the Minister can assure the House that this delay is a result of the Home Office carefully assessing the age of the young people we are granting sanctuary to.

Europol has warned that at least 10,000 unaccompanied child refugees have gone missing since entering Europe after fleeing the most terrible political situation in Syria and elsewhere in north Africa and the middle east. Citizens UK thinks there are at least 54 unaccompanied girls, mainly Eritrean, in the Calais camp, and they are eligible to enter under the Dubs amendment. These are children who have had their homes, their parents and their entire lives taken away from them and they are in real danger. Does the Minister agree that our resolve to give sanctuary and protection to unaccompanied child refugees must remain undiminished? We cannot succumb to compassion fatigue.

I know that some Conservative Members have called for dental checks to determine the age of children coming over, but the Journal of Forensic Sciences found that when it comes to determining if someone is aged between 17 and 19 years old, dental checks are wrong up to 50% of the time. The British Dental Association, whose members would presumably have to carry out the mooted checks, has said that they would be “inappropriate and unethical”. Does the Minister agree that calling for dental checks is an unworkable red herring?

I am pleased that the Government are committed to helping unaccompanied child refugees, and 20,000 Syrian refugees by 2020. However, given the scale of the refugee crisis, we can and should do more. There will be challenges along the way and things will not go perfectly, but helping people in dire need—and they are—is the right thing to do. When we meet bumps in the road people in this place, and in other positions of power, we should keep a calm head and continue to offer a welcoming embrace to those who are fleeing the most desperate circumstances.

Mr Goodwill: The points made by the hon. Lady encapsulate the vast majority of the United Kingdom’s view of the compassion that we should show and our legal responsibility to step up to the mark to ensure that vulnerable children in those camps are looked after as well as possible. It is in the joint interests of both the United Kingdom and the French Republic that the camp is removed, and, more importantly, that is in the interests of the people in that camp. I must make it clear that nobody needs to be in that camp. The French have facilities for people who ask to leave the camp and large numbers have already left it.

I have already covered the point on dental checks. One additional point, which I think some of the media have failed to grasp, is that there are two distinct categories of children. First, there are the Dublin III children, who qualify because they have family here in the United Kingdom, and those are the children whom we prioritise to move before the camps are cleared. Secondly, there are the children who qualify under the Dubs amendment. The criterion in that case is where their needs will best be served. I can assure the House that we will prioritise the most vulnerable in that group—the under-13s and those who are vulnerable for other reasons—to ensure that that can happen. They cannot be processed as quickly. We need to remove them to a place of safety as the clearance starts and then ensure that we can fully live up to the commitments that this Government made when they accepted the Dubs amendment.

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): My constituents are very worried about migrant children. Can my hon. Friend confirm that the Home Office is working closely with NGOs and the local authorities in France to identify and resettle children who are in Calais?

Mr Goodwill: The role of NGOs is vital because many of those in the camps may not view people in uniform or in authority in the same way as we do. Charities such as the British Red Cross, which has been helping to bring children across, and Barnardo’s, which is stepping up to the mark by providing some short-term accommodation before the children are moved on, are playing a vital role. We appreciate the efforts that NGOs are making, working in conjunction with the UK and French authorities to ensure that we discharge our obligations.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): The Home Office is to be commended for finally moving to process children from the Calais camps covered by our legal obligations under both the Dublin convention and the Dubs amendment, which the Minister has mentioned. I am very grateful to the Home Secretary for giving me a full update on what is happening earlier this week, and I am very proud that many of the children coming from Calais will be welcomed in Scotland. I can assure the House that they will be most welcome there.

An update in due course on the numbers being processed would be appreciated. Can the Minister confirm that that will be made available? I have been to the camps at Calais and I have witnessed how vulnerable children are living in inhumane conditions. To impose invasive treatment now, when we are finally helping them, would be a dereliction of the UK Government’s moral duty towards them. I am happy to hear from the Minister that the Government are listening to the expert advice and not giving in to the sort of unpleasant pressure that he is receiving from some on his Back Benches.
The children at Calais have come from some of the most difficult and unsafe parts of the world. In some respects the instability from which they have fled has been caused by failed British foreign policy. Some of them have indeed grown older in the camp while waiting to be processed, and that should not be held against them. As the Minister said, the definition of a child is “a person under the age of 18”, and anyone who is familiar with children will know that a young man in his teens under the age of 18 separated from his parents is a vulnerable person.

I very much regret that this question, some of the stuff that we have seen in the tabloids and some of the behaviour of some members of the audience on “Question Time” last night are symptomatic of the xenophobia that has arisen in this country since the referendum. Today we are all united in our condemnation of homophobia. What are the Government doing to quell the rising tide of xenophobia in this country? What will the Minister do to challenge false information in the press and to calm any doubts about how the children will be treated when they arrive here?

Mr Goodwill: As I said, we would expect the age profile of children arriving in the UK under Dublin III —those with family in the UK—to reflect the overall age profile in the camp, which is mainly older children. Under Dubs, we are encouraging the most vulnerable to come forward, and those will be the younger children.

Let me provide an update on the progress that we have made under the Dublin regulation. Since the beginning of the year, over 140 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children have come from Europe and have been accepted for transfer to the UK under the family reunion provisions, of whom 80 are from France. That compares with 20 in the whole of last year.

I join the hon. and learned Lady in condemning any xenophobia. That is not in the English or the Scottish psyche or that of any other part of this country. The small minority who may hold such attitudes and whose attitudes are sometimes translated into actions are to be condemned right across the House.

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): What specific actions are being taken by the UK and French security forces to stop criminal gangs from exploiting vulnerable people, particularly children, in Calais?

Mr Goodwill: It is a matter of great concern that criminal gangs, particularly people traffickers, are in the camps. The best way to curtail the actions of those criminal gangs is to dismantle the camp and disperse the people around the country, where they are less able to be targeted. I am pleased that the Home Office, working with our French counterparts, has succeeded in making a number of arrests where people trafficking is going on, and we will continue to keep up the pressure.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): My constituent, Norman Vetter, sent me an extract this morning from the British Medical Journal, which states:

“Medical estimation of age is still inaccurate and the results are unreliable.”

It goes on to say:

“Age estimations have standard deviations of more than 12 months and are limited by intraindividual discrepancies, racial differences, and poor inter-rater reliability.”

This is going on, and we will continue to keep up the pressure.

Mr Goodwill: The hon. Gentleman is right. All the august medical and dental bodies that I quoted made it clear that medical or dental evidence cannot be used as a way of determining age. My own wisdom teeth did not come down until quite late in life. In many cases, those young people have not enjoyed the same nutrition as we have, so their stage of growth may vary. I underline the fact that all the evidence indicates that we cannot use medical or dental data. If the determination of age is necessary, there is the Merton process, which requires referral by two social workers and takes about 28 days. That method is used by social services throughout the country where an accurate determination of age is needed. That could not be done within the available time, even if we could do it on French territory.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): I welcome the Minister’s comments so far. What will be in the public’s mind, though, is what they are seeing in the media, as opposed to what we are hearing today. What work will the Home Office do to reassure the public about those whom we are helping?

Mr Goodwill: We have all seen the pictures from the camps and the terrible conditions that both young people and adults have to endure there. I know that the wish of the vast majority of the British people is to ensure that, if we have a legal responsibility under either the Dublin III regulation or the Dubs amendment, we should step up to the mark and ensure that those children are brought to a place of safety here in the UK. Working with our French colleagues, that is what we intend to do.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): I, too, welcome the Minister’s comments in response to a question that shows not only a lack of compassion, but a fundamental lack of understanding of the fact that these young people have had to grow up beyond their years because they are children who have been robbed of their childhood and have to fend for themselves. Does the Minister agree, and will he do everything possible with his Department to ensure that these children and young people do not grow old waiting to be processed?

Mr Goodwill: Previously, the Dublin process did take some weeks, but given the timescale of the projected clearance, it is important that we have accelerated that process to make sure that those children can be processed. I am pleased that we are doing that. I pay tribute to our Home Office staff, who have been over there in difficult conditions to deliver on that promise.

Craig Williams (Cardiff North) (Con): Will the Minister please explain the process through which the Government work with the Italian, French and Greek Governments, as well as with non-governmental organisations, to identify child refugees and speed up the process of bringing in child refugees when that is in their best interests?
Mr Goodwill: The Dublin process is relatively simple: it requires the child concerned to apply for asylum in the country they are in and then to apply for transfer under the Dublin process. These are not just children with families in the UK; it applies to all European Union countries and a number of transfers have taken place.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): The media circus over the past few days has been not only distasteful, but downright dangerous. The media exposure will serve to fan further the flames of intolerance, which is massively irresponsible at a time of rising hate crime in England. What exactly is the Home Office doing to protect the identities of vulnerable children with blankets over their heads, and those at most risk?

Mr Goodwill: There were certainly some pictures in the press of children with blankets over their heads, and that was specifically to protect their identities; as children, their identities need to be protected. I have confidence in the compassion of the British people and their wish to support us in what we are doing. A small minority in the media, or noises off, should not be listened to.

Graham Evans (Weaver Vale) (Con): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, his Department and all the work he is doing to help these most vulnerable children. Will he update the House on what assistance the Government have offered the French Government to clear the camp at Calais?

Mr Goodwill: We are working very closely with the French Government, and where resources are needed we are ensuring that we can help wherever we can. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has met her opposite number on a number of occasions. We are working very closely with the French. It is in our common interests to ensure that the camp is cleared—not just because of the people there, but because of the pull factor that it has for people who may be thinking about making the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I welcome the measured approach that the Minister has taken in his response and seriously question the integrity of the hon. Member on the Back Benches who had the audacity to question the statistically—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The hon. Lady should not question the hon. Gentleman's integrity. We all have integrity in this House, and we are not going to change that. Minister, do you want to pick something out of that?

Mr Goodwill indicated dissent.

Mr Deputy Speaker: If not, we will move on.

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the information he has given the House this morning. When the child refugees are being admitted because they have family ties in the UK, are checks made with their families here if there are any doubts about their ages? Are the Government keeping a record of the ages of all the children being admitted, and will that be published?

Mr Goodwill: We are certainly keeping records of the children. After the children arrive at Lunar House in Croydon for initial processing—"processing" is a terrible word, but the House knows what I mean: the initial welcome they get there—they will then be moved on to temporary holding facilities around the country before they are reunited with their families. All the necessary social services checks will be carried out on those families to ensure the safety of the children.

Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): Can the Minister provide a bit more detail on exactly what the Government are doing to help protect vulnerable people and migrant children across Europe and the Balkans?

Mr Goodwill: As the previous Prime Minister announced at this Dispatch Box, it is important that we should not be distracted by the events in Calais and elsewhere around Europe from the real need, which is in the refugee camps in the war zones and the countries around them. I am pleased that we are the second biggest donor, and we are working closely to ensure that people there get help. There is also, of course, the programme for bringing 20,000 people across from those areas. They are the most vulnerable. Those who can make the journey right across Europe are not necessarily the most vulnerable, and I believe that ours is the right policy.

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): Will my hon. Friend reassure the House that safeguarding checks are fully in place for the vulnerable children who arrive on our shores and that they will be protected and kept safe?

Mr Goodwill: Absolutely. Home Office officials, working with local government social services officials, will be making sure that we discharge all our responsibilities to protect the children.

Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): Many constituents in the Calder Valley have contacted me wanting to know why, given that we have said that we are going to take children from the jungle in Calais, we are actually taking young men and not young girls. Can the Minister confirm that the only unaccompanied children—that is, those under 18—in the Calais jungle are in fact young men?

Mr Goodwill: Some 90% of those in the camps who are children are young men. It is important that, as we move to the next phase, we target the most vulnerable—the younger children and those at most risk.
Sexual Offences (Pardons Etc) Bill
Proceedings resumed.

11.25 am

Nick Herbert: As I was saying, it seems to me that there is no difference between the Government and the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire with respect to the intention of the Bill: those who are living to whom an injustice has been done should be pardoned, but the intention is not to pardon those who committed offences that would still be criminal offences today. The only disagreement is about the actual effect of the Bill.

The hon. Gentleman has suggested a specific mechanism for ensuring that people do not make improper use of a pardon: the onus of proof would be on them to show that they had not committed what would now still be an offence. In those circumstances, it seems entirely right and proper, especially given that the Government encouraged the hon. Gentleman in the first place to introduce his Bill after his success in the private Members’ Bill ballot, that the Bill is given a Second Reading today and proceeds to Committee, where these differences in legal effect could be properly ironed out.

I accept that, in bringing forward their proposals a very short time ago, the Government intend to do broadly the same thing in fulfilment of their manifesto commitment as the Bill seeks to do. However, I also understand why the hon. Gentleman feels that his Bill should receive a Second Reading and that there should be further discussion about the effects that his Bill proposes.

The Government originally encouraged the Bill but a couple of days before its debate on Second Reading have introduced their own alternative measures: I do not think that is generally a good way to proceed. If there has been some misunderstanding or breakdown in communication, I urge both sides to restore communication. There has been some misunderstanding or breakdown in communication, I urge both sides to restore communication.

John Nicolson: I confirm that if the Government honour their original promise to me and support my Bill, I will be very happy to engage with any concerns they have in Committee.

Nick Herbert: I am sure that the Government will have heard that.

It would be a pity if hon. Members who do not share the majority view here today—that the Bill’s general provisions should proceed and that in general it is right that people should be pardoned—and who do not accept the Conservative party’s manifesto commitment to that effect were given an excuse to attempt not to allow the Bill to proceed, because of the disagreement over the Bill’s legal effect. There is, I repeat, no disagreement about the intention of the hon. Gentleman’s Bill; it is the same as the Government’s intention. There is, therefore, broad agreement that this is the right thing to do.

People will be listening to this debate. The signal that the House of Commons sends on these matters is immensely important. As I said before the urgent question, it is important in terms of the justice that should be done to those who are still living, when a great injustice was done before. It is important to many young people who are struggling and coming to terms with their sexuality and who want to ensure acceptance today. It is important that the message this country sends out to the rest of the world is that the legislation we passed and promoted in an age gone by was not only wrong then but is still capable of doing great injustice today.

We should alone for that in a very clear manner, and we should not allow the message that we wish to send to all those groups of people to be distorted. The House of Commons should stand for justice and equality, and we should stand for the principle that, where an injustice was done in the past, we should recognise that clearly and unequivocally. That is why this Bill should be given a Second Reading.

11.30 am

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson) on bringing this important and essential Bill to Parliament. There has been huge progress in allowing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex equality in recent years, with significant changes in laws and attitudes that have seen Scotland become the best country in Europe for LGBTI legal rights, with the rest of the UK close behind.

Despite those welcome steps forward, we must never forget the appalling way LGBTI people have been treated in the UK throughout history. The criminalisation of thousands of gay and bisexual men, who were cautioned, convicted, imprisoned and even castrated under homophobic laws that banned sex between consenting adult men is a complete wrong in our history. We must now take ownership and apologise for that.

The namesake of this Bill, Alan Turing, was a mathematician, code breaker and computing pioneer, whose work cracking the Enigma code is said to have shortened world war two by two to four years. He lost his job with the secret service after being convicted of gross indecency, and he was chemically castrated by means of a series of injections of female hormones. As a result, he took his own life just two years later, in 1954.

In 2013, Alan Turing was granted a posthumous royal pardon—61 years after he had been charged at a Manchester police station. Now, that is all good, but it is perverse and illogical that Turing is the only person so far to have been pardoned. I am sure no one in the House doubts that there needs to be wider action. The Government have a duty to pardon everybody who was convicted under the gross indecency law in these historical homophobic rulings.

It is thought that at least 49,000 other gay and bisexual men were convicted under similar outdated laws, until homosexuality was deemed not to be illegal in 1967. Each was just as unfairly persecuted, and many suffered similarly awful fates to Alan Turing. It is estimated that 16,000 of these men are still alive today. Many find themselves outed, interrogated and ostracised from society over their sexuality, and they have suffered long-lasting psychological damage.

From what I understand, there is currently a disregard process. Men can apply through the Home Office to have their record cleared, which removes any mention of an offence from criminal record checks. That is simply not good enough. Although those men would still have to apply to have their record expunged, the Bill would give a blanket pardon to all men who have lived their life with an unfair, unjust criminal conviction.
Stonewall, the leading LGBTI charity, has given its full support to the measures laid out in the Bill, on the basis that it makes a stronger statement on the seriousness of the Government’s commitment in this area of social life. If we are to take action, and to provide leadership, it is best that we do that wholeheartedly, with the full backing of the law. I would go further and call on the Prime Minister to make a full public apology to LGBTI individuals in the United Kingdom for the injustice they have suffered.

Nothing we do now can fully make amends for the cruel discrimination these men have suffered. However, I hope this Bill goes some way towards giving a sense of closure to these men and their families.

11.34 am

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Dundee West (Chris Law). I hope you will not mind, Mr Deputy Speaker, if I mark the 50th anniversary of the Aberfan disaster in a couple of sentences and pay tribute to those residents in Torquay—particularly in Chelston, in my constituency—who offered their homes up in hospitality, to give people not only somewhere to go but respite away from the scene where so many people had lost the lives. A plaque commemorates that to this day at Torre Abbey.

I congratulate the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson) on bringing the Bill to the House. Whatever the outcome of today’s debate, we saw the major change announced by the Government yesterday, which will finally see people viewed as innocent, and show that they were not committing a criminal offence as we would know it today.

In his introduction, the hon. Gentleman talked about how, when he was born, these things were a criminal offence. However, even when I was born, it was still a criminal offence in Scotland and Northern Ireland to be who you are. It took until 1982, quite shamefully—15 years after decriminalisation in England—for similar provisions finally to come into effect in Northern Ireland. Some territories that fly our flag—maybe not the SNP’s flag—still had laws of this nature as recently as the 1990s. It almost beggars belief that people still thought these things.

We could look back through history at a whole range of offences that, nowadays, we would say are not offences. For example, we do not believe that there is anyone in our constituencies today who is practising as a witch and trying to make someone ill. [Interruption.] Well, perhaps we might be getting a few spells cast here today. Let us be clear: such convictions were patent nonsense—people were sent to the gallows for something that was absolute nonsense and that was based on fear and hysteria. The difference with these offences is that people are gay or lesbian—that is who they are—but, in the past, that would have been a criminal offence. The laws we are referring to, under which people were still being convicted not that long ago—some of those people are still alive—were passed only 20 or so years after the death penalty had been removed in this country. That is why, for me, having such a pardon makes eminent sense.

I have felt a bit in today’s debate that we are dancing on the head of a pin, to be blunt. We have the argument that a pardon should be given, but that it will be replicated only on criminal records checks, which are the key part of this, on application, versus the argument that a pardon should be granted after removal from criminal record checks. I think we would all agree that criminal record checks have to be absolutely accurate—I say that having listened to the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire. I have therefore found some of the argument on both sides rather interesting in terms of the actual nub of this issue.

Likewise, having heard both arguments, and having got a copy of the Bill, I think there is no suggestion from anyone that what is still a criminal offence today should not remain on someone’s record; the debate is how we get where we want. I very much welcome the fact that the Government’s amendment to the Bill that is already in the Lords and that is due to come back here in the not-too-distant future will probably be the quickest way of getting there.

We need to be clear that nobody is suggesting that someone should be able to go around claiming that they would have been innocent of an offence that would still be an offence to this day. That is particularly the case where we have more modern legislation in relation to those in positions of authority over those aged 16 or 17. Quite bizarrely, given all the hysteria around the impact on younger boys, there was not actually any legislation back in the 1950s that made it an offence for a teacher to be a predator towards a 16 or 17-year-old student of the opposite sex. To be fair to the then Labour Government, it made eminent sense that, when changing the age of consent, that anomaly was righted. It was equally as bad for a 30 or 40-year-old teacher to prey on a member of the opposite sex as on someone of their own sex. The issue was their using their position to abuse someone, not the type of relationship involved. It is also about looking back into the past. Some people would ask, “Why apply it to offences before 1967?”, but we all realise that there were offences before 1967.

My hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker), who sadly is not in his place, talked about the police’s reactions and behaviour. Peter Tatchell’s book, interestingly, says that in some cases there were more prosecutions after 1967 than there had been before, because some forces recognised that the pre-1967 legislation was from another era, and the enforcement of it was mixed and variable. In the mid-1940s, during world war two, there was almost a policy of discreetly ignoring things on the basis that it was seen as helpful, most famously in the case of Alan Turing, to use people’s skills in the fight for freedom. Then in the 1950s, there were moves to take that freedom away by prosecuting them for historical offences. It makes sense to look not just at those who were convicted on the law pre-1967 but those who were convicted up until very recently on the basis of different laws. It should also be remembered that there is still on the statute book a bar on gay men serving in the merchant navy. I believe there is a private Member’s Bill that we will discuss on a future Friday to remove that, but it is sad to note that there are still parts of our legislation that contain these types of historical provisions.

Where we have got to today reflects the changing attitudes of society; I openly admit that I had a major change of attitude when I went to university, so I got a secondary school, like a lot of people, I fell for some of the prejudiced arguments and it was all about what the group thought. When I got to university, for the first
time I was with people who were out, saying who they were and being proud of it. The president of Warwick University’s Pride society had a chat with me at the time when the debate was going on about section 28. He said, “I should be a Conservative.” I said, “Really?” He said, “Yeah, I believe in freedom of choice. You believe in freedom of choice, Kevin. Your party does, up until when I make the choice about who I want to love, and you argue against. I can choose whether I want a pension, I can choose what house I buy, what kind of life I have, and whether I have children, yet I can’t choose who I love.” That, for me, was quite a transformative moment. It was such a logical argument—I had that choice, so why should they not have it? Some people know that my partner is a little older than I am. I have the right to choose that—there has never been an offence in law against it—so why should it be an offence for anyone else to choose whom they love, provided that they are both of the age where they can make an informed and mutual choice and give consent?

Sometimes we hear the religious argument—I am a practising Christian; I sometimes help to administer the elements at my church—that was regularly used to justify the laws of the past. Yet there is a law in the ten commandments about adultery, which is described as a sin, but has never been a criminal offence.

**John Nicolson:** There is also in Deuteronomy a ruling against mixed fabrics, but to the best of my knowledge we do not publicly stone people for mixing rayon and wool.

**Kevin Foster:** There is another part about the appropriate price for slaves that is found in another part of it. The hon. Gentleman may not be aware of the homophobes and prejudiced individuals in some parts of the United States who commonly like to have tattooed on their bodies a particular part of Leviticus about how certain things are an abomination, forgetting the bit in Leviticus that describes tattooing the skin as a sin. It is a delicious irony that they are so blinded by their prejudice that they have not even bothered to read the rest of that book of the Bible. They do not know the sheer irony of what they are doing and how they are showing their total and utter ignorance when they have a tattoo like that on their body. It has been hundreds of years since we had the idea that religious belief should be enforced by political power. Therefore the argument used in the past seems completely incoherent.

The Wolfenden committee concluded that offences in relation to homosexuality were victimless crimes. No one had complained, both sides were happy to take part, and nobody’s rights had been infringed—it was just that other people were so prejudiced about someone making that choice that they thought it should be a criminal offence, with truly ridiculous penalties given that nobody had gone to the police to say, “I’ve been harmed.” All too often, this became a way of blackmailing people—if threatening to go and dob someone in. Shamefully, even until the 1990s the military police were still dealing in that sort of behaviour. I remember when I was growing up, as a teenager, there was an episode of “A Touch of Frost” based on the idea that someone could be blackmailed for their whole career on the basis of whether they are gay. That was absolutely shameful.

The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire rightly mentioned what was said at that time, including by some members of my party who were in government. John Major did the right thing in terms of the foreign service, but we did the wrong thing in not admitting people to the armed forces. The arguments that were advanced were patently stuff and nonsense. It is pleasing that in the United States President Obama is finally abandoning “Don’t ask, don’t tell”, because it was a load of nonsense—the idea that people sharing a shower is fine as long as they do not tell anyone. That was a symbolic change and a move forward.

I am in a slight quandary. It is welcome that we have a Government who are prepared to move on this, but I understand the hon. Gentleman’s arguments. I certainly will not oppose the Bill because that would be ridiculous. The Bill and the Government’s amendment both deal with the practical effects, which is the key concern. That said, amendment is almost certainly the quickest way to get this on to the statute book and finally give people a chance to—I will not say to clear their name, because they are not criminals; they are innocent. All they have done is to be who they are. I find the idea of clearing their name quite strange.

**Chris Bryant:** I broadly sympathise with the direction in which the hon. Gentleman is going, but I draw his attention to the fact that the Government’s measure does not do the same thing. The only way to achieve the same thing is to send the Bill into Committee.

**Kevin Foster:** Ultimately, though, we are debating the criminal records. The Bill refers to a blanket pardon, but it only takes effect in terms of someone getting their name off the criminal records, via an application, and the Government’s idea is that their name is got off the criminal records and then they get a formal pardon. That is the fundamental difference. I accept that this could be addressed in Committee. However, after a couple of hours’ debate we all agree with the sentiment and the principle; we are dancing around on a pin.

**Mr Gyimah:** The key difference is that the Government want some safeguards around the pardon for the living. The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) spoke about some people with great moral fibre, but the Government want to protect against the situation where, if there is a blanket pardon, someone who had not been pardoned could go around saying that they had. What does one say to the victims of that person if it was non-consensual sex in that case?

**Kevin Foster:** With respect to the Minister, anyone could go around making a claim that they had been pardoned for an offence; it is the position in the criminal records that makes the key difference.

**Lyn Brown:** I have 12 more speakers and the Front Benchers to get in as well.

**Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle):** I hear the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) spoke about some people with great moral fibre, but the Government want to protect against the situation where, if there is a blanket pardon, someone who had not been pardoned could go around saying that they had. What does one say to the victims of that person if it was non-consensual sex in that case?

**Kevin Foster:** With respect to the Minister, anyone could go around making a claim that they had been pardoned for an offence; it is the position in the criminal records that makes the key difference.
Kevin Foster: I hear what the shadow Minister is saying. To be fair to the Minister, he has gone further than anyone has in the last 50 years towards pardoning people, so I am loath to criticise him. As I have said, I will not oppose the Bill, because that would be the wrong step. I will, however, probably find myself abstaining, because I think that the Government are offering something that will make a difference. I say to the Minister that anyone can claim to have been pardoned, but the criminal record checks are the final determinant. I do not think that anyone on either side of the argument is contending that those decisions should be changed unless someone proves that they did not commit a criminal offence.

Ultimately, we are talking about people who never committed an offence; all that they did was to be who they were. It is unfortunate that we have ended up arguing so strongly over minor points.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Lindsay Hoyle): Order. May I just say that we are in danger of talking the Bill out? I want to hear everybody, and Members are still waiting to speak. Can we try to help each other? With 12 speakers, if we try to keep it short, we can get there.

11.50 am

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): I would like to pay my respects to the people of Aberfan. We will not forget you.

I thank the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson) for introducing the Bill, and I thank the many Members, across parties, who support it. We have heard fantastic speeches today, especially from my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who is very honourable.

The Government’s announcement that they intend to amend the Policing and Crime Bill is, of course, welcome but it does not go far enough. The Bill we are debating concerns posthumous pardons and pardons for men who are still alive. It would pardon anyone who had been convicted of, or cautioned for, a specified offence and who had died before the legislation came into force, provided that the following two conditions are met: that the other person involved in the conduct constituting the offence consented to it and was aged 16 or over; and that such conduct would not be an offence under section 71 of the Sexual Offences Act 2003, which concerns sexual activity in a public lavatory.

The Bill also relates to pardons for men who are still living. It would pardon anyone who had been convicted of, or cautioned for, an offence listed in section 92(1) of the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012 and who was living at the time the clause came into force. Pardons for living men would not be automatic but would be tied to the disregard process set out in the 2012 Act. Anyone whose conviction or caution had already become disregarded under the 2012 Act at the time the clause came into force would be pardoned for that offence. Anyone whose conviction or caution becomes disregarded under the 2012 Act after the clause came into force would be pardoned for that offence at the time the disregard took effect. Living men would not receive a pardon unless they had also successfully applied to have their conviction or caution disregarded under the 2012 Act.

The press has been quick to term the proposal “Turing’s law”. For Alan Turing, a war hero without whom we might not have cracked the Enigma code and defeated fascism, his pardon came posthumously and too late. Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown rightly issued an official apology in 2009 after a public petition. In issuing the apology, Gordon Brown said of Mr Turing:

“In 1952, he was convicted of gross indecency—in effect, tried for being gay. His sentence—and he was faced with the miserable choice of this or prison—was chemical castration by a series of injections of female hormones. He took his own life just two years later.

Thousands of people have come together to demand justice for Alan Turing and recognition of the appalling way he was treated. While Turing was dealt with under the law of the time, and we can’t put the clock back, his treatment was of course utterly unfair, and I am pleased to have the chance to say how deeply sorry I am and we all are for what happened to him. Alan and so many thousands of other gay men who were convicted, as he was, convicted, under homophobic laws, were treated terribly. Over the years, millions more lived in fear of conviction. I am proud that those days are gone and that in the past 12 years this Government has done so much to make life fairer and more equal for our LGBT community. This recognition of Alan’s status as one of Britain’s most famous victims of homophobia is another step towards equality, and long overdue.”

Opposition Members, and Labour supporters the length and breadth of the UK, are proud that it was a Labour Government and a Labour Prime Minister that started the process that has led us to this debate. The coalition Government initially refused to exercise a pardon in 2012, and it was right that, under the weight of public opinion, they changed their mind in 2013, so that the Queen could grant a pardon in 2014. As many have said today, there are so many more men who have not received a pardon, and they should receive one. It is right that we recognise the need to extend the pardon afforded to Alan Turing to others who were convicted of what was, much to history’s shame, a criminal offence, although most people today quite rightly find that hard to believe.

That is why Labour committed to Turing’s law in the 2015 general election. The law as it stands does not go far enough, as Rachel Barnes, a great niece of Alan Turing, recognised in 2015 when she handed in a petition to Downing Street. She said:

“I consider it to be fair and just that everybody who was convicted under the Gross Indecency Law is given a pardon. It is illogical that my great uncle has been the only one to be pardoned when so many were convicted of the same crime. I feel sure that Alan Turing would have also wanted justice for everybody.”

It is right that the Government have listened to those who have campaigned on the issue for many years. The private Member’s Bill before the House today would, of course, go further. Pardons would be given to all convicted of specified offences, save for those convicted of behaviour that would still amount to an offence today. It is difficult to see the Government’s objection to that in principle. The problems of perception that the Minister highlights could easily be avoided through appropriate publicity. It is often suggested that the disregard scheme should have more promotion. The Government should give serious thought to that, whatever the outcome of proceedings in the House today.
The proposed amendment to section 92 of the 2012 Act also looks like a logical progression. Section 32 of the Sexual Offences Act 1956—soliciting by men for immoral purposes—was not included in the list of convictions that should be disregarded in the 2012 Act. There are many examples that show that the offence in section 32 was used as recently as the 1990s to arrest and prosecute gay and bisexual men for suggesting sex between what they understood to be consenting adults, often in incidents involving plain-clothes police officers. At present men convicted under section 32 cannot have their conviction disregarded, even though it was repealed by the Sexual Offences Act 2003. The Bill will add those convictions to the list of those that can be disregarded, closing that loophole.

Labour recognises that the conviction and persecution of more than 50,000 men affected by these vicious and discriminatory laws has left a legacy of pain and hurt, not just to the men themselves but to their families and friends. This Bill is about our country sending those men a clear and unequivocal message that they did nothing wrong, and they should not have been criminalised. It is time to right a grievous historical wrong. That is why I and Labour Members will support the Bill. We will make a real difference to many people in this country.

Iain Stewart (Milton Keynes South) (Con): It is a pleasure to be called to speak in this important debate. I begin by adding my congratulations to the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson), first on securing the top spot in the private Members’ Bill ballot and then on deciding to use it to introduce this important Bill. I was pleased and honoured to be asked to be a sponsor of the Bill. My support for it remains undiluted, and, should we divide on it, I will be supporting the hon. Gentleman in the Lobby.

I identified with much of what the hon. Gentleman said in his opening speech about the experience of growing up as a closeted gay man in the west of Scotland. I went through a similar experience and upbringing, and it was not easy. It took me a long time to come to terms with who I was. Indeed, the hon. Gentleman and I went to the same school, although—and it might be un gallant of me to say this—not at the same time; I followed a few years later, but I can very much identify with his experiences. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) says from a sedentary position that he is proud to have that school in his constituency, and a very fine school it is. But it was not easy growing up in that atmosphere being gay, and having to hide that out of a sense of shame. I will come back to that point in a little while.

My other reason for being very passionate about this measure is a constituency one. I am very proud that in my constituency of Milton Keynes South is Bletchley Park, where Alan Turing did much of his celebrated work during the second world war; as many Members have mentioned, he did much to shorten that conflict and save thousands, if not millions, of lives. I am very pleased that to the point where I was granted a pardon during the last Parliament. That was the culmination of a long campaign over many years by many people inside and outside the House.

I remember that during the debate about whether Alan Turing should be granted a pardon as opposed to an apology a number of objections were raised. On the one and only time I have been grilled on “Newsnight” by Jeremy Paxman, two particular arguments were made. The first was that it was wrong retrospectively to pardon for something that was a crime at the time but now, in more enlightened times, is thankfully no longer so, because if we were to start pardoning for that offence, where would we stop? What about witchcraft—would we grant a pardon and an apology for that? Well, if people want to bring forward a Bill to pardon people for witchcraft, bring it forward. But this particular issue really matters to lots of people. It is a sign of a civilised society that we can collectively pardon. There is a precedent in the blanket pardon issued to soldiers executed in world war one for so-called cowardice. I was very happy at the time to support the pardon for Alan Turing on the basis that we can retrospectively pardon.

The second argument was, why just Alan Turing? Yes, he is a famous and celebrated person to whom we owe an enormous debt of gratitude, but, many Members have alluded to the fact that he was just one individual out of thousands who were caught under the same legislation. It was a systemic and institutionalised injustice. I was happy to champion a pardon for Alan Turing because as a country we owe him a huge debt of gratitude. The pardon was right for that reason. It was also right as a symbol of the fact that the country had moved on; by pardoning him, we were sending a very clear message that such so-called crimes were no longer a stain on our collective conscience.

It troubled me, however, that the pardon was just for that one person. As the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire and others have powerfully argued, this matter affected many thousands of other men. That is why I am very pleased that the Bill has been introduced. To be fair to the Government, they have made progress on this through the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012 in the last Parliament. They have also indicated their support for Lord Sharkey’s amendment in the other place. That is very welcome progress and I will wholeheartedly support that if it is the vehicle through which change happens. But I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman and the many others from both sides of the House who have said that we can do better. We can move forward in a much more symbolic way that will make a real difference to many people in this country.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): That is an important point of symbolism, which is at the heart of what the hon. Gentleman is saying. I would dearly have loved to speak in today’s debate, but my voice is failing me due to a cold. I did not come out to my family until just after I was elected. It was with the support of my SNP colleagues, my family and friends that I made a public statement earlier this year. I hope the next generation of young people and politicians will not have to make public statements and will not have to say that they are gay—because it will not matter: our colour, our race, our sexual identity will not make a difference; all will be equal. That is why it is so important to give this Bill its Second Reading so that it can go forward into Committee. We will have better scrutiny of this Bill in Committee than we will of an amendment as an afterthought to a Bill that is already going through Parliament.
Iain Stewart: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady, and I congratulate her on finding her moment to make that announcement. I agree that it should not have to be made. All of us who are gay have a different journey, and we come to terms with it in different ways at different times—privately with our families and friends, and then publicly.

That brings me on neatly to my next point. Although we live in enlightened times in which we have passed the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013; section 28—or section 2A as it was in Scotland—has been consigned to the dustbin, and adoption and military procedures have changed, some people ask why we need a Bill such as this. They say, “Haven’t you already got all you’ve been asking for?” However, it is important to note that even people such as me, who were born after homosexuality was decriminalised, can still sometimes carry with us perhaps a sense of shame or perhaps a sense that we are not entirely comfortable in our own skins.

That is a legacy of growing up in an age when there was prejudice. Different people coped with it in different ways. I struggled with it at times. I read a very good book, and I encourage other Members to read it, called “The Velvet Rage” by Dr Alan Downs. He gets to the heart of why some gay men, even in enlightened times and in countries where the law is as liberal as it could be, still feel that rage and shame. Addressing that problem does matter.

The Bill will not in itself clear all the hang-ups or depression, or other feelings that people have, but it will be an important next step—in the same way as same sex marriage was and all the other changes we have made in recent years. I urge the Government to think seriously about supporting this Bill. They should at least grant it a Second Reading.

If I remember correctly from when I was studying politics at university, the point of a Second Reading is to provide a debate on the principle of the Bill in question. No one here today has expressed an objection to the principle of this Bill. There may be questions about the detail, the process, the capacity of the Ministry of Justice—these are perfectly valid concerns to raise. We are a Parliament; that is what we do. We look at the detail, tease out issues and look for unintended consequences and so forth. That can surely be done in Committee.

I think that if we approve the Bill today, it would send out a powerful and important message to the country, to the thousands of men who still struggle with what happened in the past and to those growing up today who remain uncertain about whether and how they should come out. Please let us approve this today. Let us take it to Committee and tease out the issues there. That is the appropriate procedure for this Bill. I congratulate the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire once again on introducing the Bill. I will be proud to support it even later in the Lobby if it comes to that.

12.9 pm

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): It is a genuine pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart), who delivered a powerful speech in an honourable Bill. I also want to thank particularly, in the warmest terms, the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson) for introducing it. Unlike him, I was not born in the 1960s, although my parents were, and I reflect on how much our society has changed during their lifetimes and mine. In particular, I reflect on how much the law of the land has changed just in my lifetime, and on the record of successive Governments.

We have seen the abolition of section 28 in England and Wales and section 2A in Scotland, the legalisation of equal marriage, the introduction of protection in respect of goods and services, and the ability of LGBT people to serve in the armed forces. So many changes in the law of the land brought about by this place have led to a change in our country, and our country is a better place for it, which is why I strongly support the Bill.

I welcome the fact that we are having a debate with a Conservative Government about how we should make this change in the law, rather than whether we should make it. I shall return to that point later in my short speech, but I am pleased that the Government have already taken some steps in the House of Lords. I urge them to go further this afternoon, through the Bill and through proper scrutiny in the House of Commons.

Alan Turing has an important part to play in our country’s history, but he also has an important part to play in our country’s future. Through great initiatives like LGBT history month, and through the work of science and history teachers in schools up and down the country, young people growing up in Britain today learn of the extraordinary acts of bravery and intelligence that took place at Bletchley Park, in the constituency of the hon. Member for Milton Keynes South. It is very likely that, had it not been for Alan Turing, we would not have succeeded in turning back the tide of Nazism as it swept across Europe. We would not have been successful in defeating the Nazis in the sea and in the air. It was because of the Enigma code-breaking work that took place at Bletchley Park that the allies were able to secure such a powerful advantage over the Nazis when all seemed lost on the continent of Europe.

That story is powerful not just because of the extraordinary role that Alan Turing played in a decisive moment in British history, but because, only a few years later, this hero of our country was tried before our courts, was chemically castrated, and was forced to take his own life. Young people growing up in schools today do not only learn about the enormous heroism of Alan Turing; they also learn about the extraordinary treachery of the Government of the day and the courts that allowed it to happen. That lesson and that experience cause them to reflect on what it means to be a decent human being, to reflect with horror on Britain’s past, and to aspire to a better future. As a former head of education at Stonewall, I know how powerful the work of teachers and schools is, not just in enabling young people to learn about changes in the law, but in bringing about changes in hearts and minds.

LGBT young people growing up in Britain today face a very different pressure from the pressure faced by Alan Turing and his generation. Unlike Alan Turing’s generation, they are not threatened by the letter of the law. None the less, just like Alan Turing’s generation, they feel threatened by bigotry in the streets, in the workplace, in the classroom and in the home. That is why we need to think very carefully about the message that we will send through the law today.

The pressure that LGBT people continue to face to remain in the closet because of fear of discrimination or violence in this country today has led to an appalling
situation. More than one in five gay men currently experience moderate to severe anxiety or depression, and a third of lesbian and bisexual women have thought of taking their own lives. Shockingly, according to research by Stonewall, more than 50% of LGBT young people in our schools have self-harmed, and about one in four have attempted suicide. Those are young people growing up in our country today. In any other context—in the context of the general population, for example—there would be outrage in the House and throughout the country over such figures relating to suicide and self-harm, yet these are real statistics affecting young people in our country today. They have reached epidemic proportions, and this is a national crisis. The Government need to look carefully at what they can do to tackle the mental health crisis that still affects LGBT people in Britain today.

The hon. Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) spoke powerfully about symbols, and about the power of the Bill to be an important symbol for the kind of country we want to be. I urge the Minister to think carefully about the kind of symbol that the House would be presenting today if the Bill, with all the welcome publicity it has generated, were either talked out or defeated. It would send a message that there are still people in this House and across the country who are not content to see equality for LGBT people and who look back on the progress made by this Parliament not with pride and optimism for the future but with regret and pessimism about their ability to defeat what Martin Luther King called the arc of social progress that “bends towards justice”. The Minister clearly has some technical problems with the Bill as it has been presented, but that is exactly why he should urge his colleagues to vote in favour of the Bill to be an important symbol for the kind of country we want to see.

Mr Gyimah: It is important to make it absolutely clear that the Government are not dragging their heels and are not hesitant on this important issue. We want to right this historic wrong as fairly and quickly as possible. That is why we have tabled an amendment to the Policing and Crime Bill.

Wes Streeting: I am absolutely delighted to hear that, and I will be happy to talk further with the Minister about how we can iron out the problems in the Bill as we march into the Aye Lobby together this afternoon.

We can look back with enormous pride at what has been achieved, but we must not assume that the progress we have made cannot be undone. I am sure that I am not the only person in the House this afternoon who is deeply concerned that in recent weeks and months we have seen a huge rise in hate crime across the United Kingdom, including homophobic hate crime. We are seeing the rise of far-right extremism across Europe, and the US presidential election has shown that being absolutely fine with sexual harassment is no bar to holding the highest office. People who strongly support liberal democracy have become complacent about defending it and ensuring its ongoing success. The Bill represents an important moment in that context, and it should be supported.

I want to end by quoting the words of Roger Lockyer, who is 88 years old and one of the men who had to endure a lifetime of experiences that someone of my age has thankfully not had to experience. Speaking about the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire’s Bill and about those members of his generation who were convicted, he said: “They may have been legally convicted, but they were unjustly convicted.”

This pardon is not about forgiveness for something that people did wrong. It will send a powerful message that they should never have been convicted in the first place, that those laws should never have existed and that those people should never have been prosecuted when they had done absolutely nothing wrong. The Bill is about confronting our country’s past and facing the future with confidence. That is why I will be voting for it this afternoon.

12.18 pm

Nigel Adams (Selby and Ainsty) (Con): It is a great privilege to follow the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting). I lived in Ilford as a young man, until I was drummed out of town when the locals discovered that I was a closet Tory. It is a great pleasure follow him and to have this opportunity to speak in the debate on this Bill, which is not only of great importance for justice in this country but of great emotional importance to my constituents and others who are either gay themselves or who have friends, family and colleagues who are gay and feel that they have been judged by a different standard over the years.

The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson) is my colleague on the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, and I am incredibly grateful to him for using his coveted allocation of time to bring forward these proposals in a private Member’s Bill and for sharing his ideas with me over several bottles of rosé a few weeks ago. He has done valuable work to make this a truly cross-party initiative. I thank him for including me in this and I am proud to be on my feet today in support of what he wants to achieve through the Bill. We have heard some impressive contributions, and I particularly want to mention my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert), and the hon. Members for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) and for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who made a moving speech.

Equality before the law must be not only our fundamental principle, but our fundamental practice. That means that not only must justice be done, but justice must be seen to be done. The Government’s previous disregard scheme was a step in the right direction towards justice in that it helped to ameliorate the repercussions of a criminal record for those convicted under what we now rightly consider outdated, unfair, discriminatory laws that treated sex between men differently. To truly rectify the injustice we must go further and, as the Bill proposes, grant pardons and admit that the convictions were immoral, which does not really happen under a disregard scheme. Justice will then be seen to be done and, importantly, the wrongfully criminalised and their families will feel that it has been done.
The Government’s official apology for the shameful treatment of Alan Turing was an important moment. I am pleased that the deep gratitude we now correctly feel toward Turing’s crucial contributions to Britain’s defence provided enough of a focal point that his famous cause could trigger that apology. No matter how famous or anonymous, however, no one citizen has a greater value nor a greater right to justice. That pardon was just for Alan Turing, but there is no tenable case for every other individual affected not having the same right. Like Turing, each individual is someone’s family, someone’s friend, and they deserve acknowledgement of their fundamental equality before the law.

I welcomed the comments of the Minister when he said yesterday that the Government will adopt some of the proposals in this Bill and use the Policing and Crime Bill to put right some of the injustices. However, I found the Government’s last-minute scrambling or dancing around handbags—not something I have done myself—a little slippery and disrespectful to the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire and his Bill, but I look forward to the Minister’s further remarks.

Other colleagues and the Bill’s promoter have made eloquent moral and legal cases, so I will conclude my contribution on the subject there, but I want to finish by taking the opportunity to issue a mea culpa. During my first term in office, I voted against marriage equality for a whole host of reasons. I thought at the time that what I was doing was right, but having reflected and having seen how the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 has made such a positive difference for thousands of couples around the country, I deeply regret that decision—has made such a positive difference for thousands of individuals. I am unable to admit that he got something wrong. If I had the opportunity once again, I would vote differently and I want to apologise. I apologise to friends, family members and constituents who identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual. I want them to know that I believe in their full equality. I am unable to change that previous vote, but I am pleased to have the chance today to stand in support of equality before the law, and I am more than happy to support my friend’s Bill.

12.24 pm

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): We heard some fashion advice earlier from my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald), and, without realising it, I, too, am wearing a purple tie and a yellow lanyard. Today is the day when, after years of soul searching, I have to come out as being straight—I should point out that my wife, who has been good enough to put up with me for the past 32 years, has had her suspicions. But there is a serious point here, which was referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell): I have never had to come out as being straight, so why should anyone have to come out as being gay, lesbian or anything else? I have never had to justify to anybody the codes of behaviour that guide me in my private life, partly through the faith I believe in and partly just because I am who I am. Why should somebody who follows a different path in life have to justify their right to do so? What gives me or anyone else the right to criminalise somebody simply because they are a wee bit different from how I am?

My first reason for supporting the Bill is therefore not because the various pieces of legislation that outlawed homosexual acts were wrong or mistaken, or because they have passed their sell-by date and it is time to catch up with changes in social values and so on, but because they were laws that no Parliament on earth has ever had any right to pass in the first place. Our predecessors stepped well beyond any legitimate authority they had when passing that legislation. I do not judge them, and I do not judge the police and courts that then had to enforce the legislation, but it is entirely proper that, as the successors of those who passed legislation that they had no right to pass, we should take full responsibility for doing what we can to put it right. That is also why this deserves a full Act of Parliament in its own right, as the injustice is great enough. It is appropriate that that Act should be born in the part of Parliament that is elected by the people and speaks for the people, rather than in a part that is appointed by and for the great and the good.

I was going to speak about the damage that has been done to so many lives, but I shall consider the interests of brevity, as the worst possible result we could have today would be for the Bill to be talked out. I cannot imagine anything worse than for this Parliament to send out a message that says that, almost 50 years after we decriminalised homosexual acts, we did not have time to decide whether finally to pardon and apologise to all those who were affected.

I can appreciate the concerns about creating a precedent. Apart from the example referred to earlier about young men who were executed for cowardice because they had a nervous or mental breakdown in the trenches, I am not aware of any other instance in our recent history when so many people have been subjected to such awful persecution as a result of an unjust Act of Parliament. If anyone can give me such an example and wants to introduce retrospective pardons for those affected by that legislation, I will support it, as I hope everyone else will.

My judgment on when Parliament should criminalise an act will never be based on whether it complies with the personal conduct that I impose on myself as a matter of my religious faith; it will always be based on whether that act is harmful to others. Robert Burns once said, in my favourite quote of his, even though it is not a piece of poetry, that “whatever injures society at large, or any individual in it, this is my measure of iniquity.”

That should be our measure of any proposed criminal legislation. If something does not hurt anybody else, it is nothing to do with the law of the land. Despite having a number of sometimes difficult conversations with close friends and family at the times of the debates on section 28, gay marriage, gay adoption and many other things, I have never heard anyone present me with a single piece of evidence to suggest that two men having sex are any more of a danger to society or any less a member of it than a man and a woman having sex or two women having sex. Let us remember that it has never been a criminal offence for two women to have sex, so why on earth did anyone think that it was a good idea to criminalise it for men?

A further huge damage that has been done to our society as a result of this legislation, as we see in the good example here of my hon. Friend the Member for
[Peter Grant]

East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson), who confessed that he had actually wanted to join the Government service but decided not to because he would not have been allowed to without telling lies. How many of our finest diplomats never joined the diplomatic service? How many of our best teachers never taught in front of a class of young people? How many of our best politicians never stood for any public office, not because they were not good enough, but because they were scared to do so as a result of the terror of what might then come out about their private lives?

This legislation had an appalling effect on the lives of many thousands of our fellow citizens. It has caused untold damage to the wellbeing of our whole society. As other Members have said, it was a gift to our friends in the KGB, because it is very difficult to blackmail somebody over their guilty secrets after we have said, “Your guilty secret isn’t guilty anymore and you don’t have to keep it secret anymore.” It was a blackmailers charter. We will never know how much damage was done in that regard. We do not know how many lives were blighted—I am talking about the lives of the boys and men who managed not to be convicted. We know how many men were convicted, but we will never know how many lived their entire lives under the sheer terror of being discovered. We know that a significant number of men took their own lives, because they simply could not reconcile the conflict between knowing who they were and being told every day of their lives that they were not allowed to live as the person that they believed themselves to be.

I can understand it if there are some concerns about the content of the Bill, although I have to say that it seems as though the Minister has changed his grounds for concern since the debate started. Earlier on, there was a claim that the Bill would grant a pardon to people who did not deserve to be pardoned. My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) read out a provision in the Bill that makes it clear that that cannot happen. If somebody wants to read out a provision that allows that to happen, I would like to hear it. Once that argument was debunked, it was argued that the law would not actually allow just anybody to be pardoned, but that it might give someone the opportunity to pretend that they had been pardoned. That is not the kind of argument that we expect from a Minister of the Crown in speaking about any proposed legislation. It gives me an uncomfortable feeling that the Government’s concerns are not with the fine detail of the Bill or with its principles. Clearly, there is no objection to the principle of the Bill. I am left wondering whether the problem is to do with the identity of the person who has brought in the Bill. I hope for goodness’ sake that that is not an issue.

What does it do for the reputation of this place as a democratic legislature if this Government—not this individual Minister—who have encouraged my hon. Friend and others to put a huge amount of work and effort into proposing legislation that they said that they wanted, say at the very last minute, “Actually, you can take your damned Bill, tear it up and throw it in the fire, because we have decided that we know a better way to do it.” If that were to happen today, the number of people on these islands who seriously doubt whether this place is fit as a legislature will grow. If the Bill falls for lack of time because somebody thought that it was clever to show how low they could talk for, knowing that the clear majority will of this House is for this Bill to go ahead, what should be one of the brightest days in the history of this place would soon become one of the darkest.

I appeal to Members to allow the Bill to pass, so that the thousands of men who continue to live with shame and guilt for something that they should never have felt ashamed or guilty of can live out their last days on earth knowing that they have been declared innocent of any wrongdoing and so that those for whom this decision has come too late will finally be allowed to rest eternally in peace.

12.33 pm

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant). May I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams) on his earlier comments, which I think the whole House found extremely touching and very sincere. I also congratulate the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson) on his success in the private Members’ Bill ballot and on introducing the Bill.

It would appear that we are tantalisingly close to getting a cross-party agreement that achieves the intent of so many stakeholders in this debate. I was honoured to be asked to support the Bill by the hon. Gentleman because it is entirely consistent not only with my values of a fair and tolerant Britain, but with a Conservative party manifesto commitment, in which we pledged to build on the posthumous pardon of Alan Turing with a broader measure to lift the blight of outdated convictions for homosexual acts and to introduce a new law that will pardon those—both alive and dead—who have suffered these wrongs. I note a “new law” and “pardon” in that phraseology, which is in the manifesto commitment on which I and others stood. Supporting the Bill was therefore not a difficult decision for me, because it is entirely consistent with the manifesto, yet we are now faced with not one but two Bills that aim to achieve that goal.

I was encouraged by the Government’s announcement yesterday that Lord Sharkey’s amendment to the Policing and Crime Bill will be adopted. This was no doubt spurred on by the hon. Gentleman’s Bill. Whichever of the Bills makes it on to the statute book, it will be an important and long-overdue step. It is extraordinary that there are men still alive today who live with the stigma of a criminal record for homosexual acts that are no longer illegal and in many cases have not been illegal since before I was born. It is 49 years since homosexuality was decriminalised in England, 36 years since it was decriminalised in Scotland, and 34 since it was decriminalised in Northern Ireland. We often pride ourselves in this place on leading public opinion, but in this matter we are woefully behind.

There are people who still find the idea of homosexuality uncomfortable, but I am sure that the vast majority of those who hold that view would still accept that there is a world of difference between being uncomfortable with the acts of others and believing such acts should be illegal. Personally, I do not believe that there is only so
Mr Churchill-Coleman has tried every measure imaginable to try to clear his name, both in personal representations to several police forces and through my offices. He was quite staggered to find out only last year that the offence for which he was cautioned remains an offence. Adding that offence to the disregard provisions of the 2012 Act is a necessary and urgent step that the Government must take and it is not contained in the Sharkey amendment. Several hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster), have said that we are dancing on the head of a pin when it comes to the process. There are important measures in today’s Bill which, as I understand it, the Sharkey amendment does not even mention and they need to be legislated for.

Let us consider what the legislative intent of leaving in soliciting and importuning under section 32 of the Sexual Offences Act 1956 means. I wrote to Home Office Ministers just several months, and the reply I received was that it remains a criminal offence and that the Government have no intention of amending the scope of the legislation. Soliciting and importuning—which judges have interpreted as any form of communication, ranging from verbal propositions to merely smiling and winking at a person of the same sex—will remain a criminal offence. That is incoherent and iniquitous and it must be changed as a matter of urgency. Logically, it means that gay bars, contact ads, dating agencies, phone lines and night clubs are all illegal and liable to be shut down, should the police interpret the law in the strict manner in which it is set down. In a country where homosexuality has been decriminalised and civil partnership now exists is completely out of kilter with modern, progressive and compassionate British society, and it is still exists is completely out of kilter with modern, progressive and compassionate British society, and it is not even mentioned and they need to be legislated.

That is why we have to pass this Bill, notwithstanding the very good arguments about the need to offer an apology and a pardon, not least to give constituents such as mine some redress. This stain on his record has been a blight on his life. It has made it extremely difficult for him to apply for jobs. He is a very qualified and talented special educational needs teacher and, in some cases, a constituent of mine who does want me to name him. This stain on his record has been a blight on his life. It has made it extremely difficult for him to apply for jobs. He is a very qualified and talented special educational needs teacher and, in some cases, a constituent of mine who does want me to name him. And I know which vehicle is the best one to get what we want, but I just wish we can get to a resolution very soon.

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[Craig Williams]

It was also a privilege to witness my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams), a true Yorkshireman, apologise to this Chamber. As a Welshman, I know how difficult that can be at times, but his words brought out the best of this House.

The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), whose constituency is just up the road from mine, brought the debate home to us in this House by mentioning the shields in the Chamber of Members of the Commons that we look at every day when we debate.

Let me say to the hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) that it is a great tribute to our country and society that, for those of our generation, if he does not mind my saying so—we have had many jokes about age today, but I think I am okay in saying that—many of the things we are talking about are alien concepts. For those of our generation, it is absolutely abhorrent to think that we did this as a society and as a Parliament, so it is a privilege to be a Member of Parliament at this time and to be righting these alien concepts. I think of my children, who are aged four and younger. As they grow up they will not have to tackle any of those alien concepts and they will not come out as gay or straight. They will simply go to school as human beings and members of our society.

Although I teasingly pointed out that this is not an English Bill but an English and Welsh Bill, I welcome the words of the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire about the Scottish Government acting at pace. Would it be wrong of me to wish that he were a Member of the Scottish Government and brought the same vigour to the issue in Scotland as he has done here?

We have been talking about the matter for a while but with much agreement. There is a hint of sadness that we are almost there—we are at the final hurdle—and I wish we could come together and agree the remaining elements. I stood on the Conservative party manifesto, which was clear on the issue, and I want the changes introduced as quickly as possible. That is why I welcomed the moves yesterday. I am glad heads were nodded to the amendment in the Policing and Crime Bill that will deliver that at pace and more quickly than a private Member’s Bill would. That is at the heart of the debate.

I want to dwell for a moment on the disregard process. I hope that in his contribution the Minister will refer to public awareness of what is on offer. There is a good argument for making people aware that they can apply for the disregard.

John Nicolson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support, but he must realise that the age demographic of the men concerned is such that they will not apply for that. They will not open themselves up to the shame and humiliation of applying. The disregard is cloud cuckoo land: there has to be a blanket pardon for them to get comfort.

Craig Williams: That is the nub of the debate. We have to think of a way round because the Home Office has rejected several applications for the disregard process where the activity was non-consensual and others where the other party was under 16 at the time. The disregard process has offered a level of safety, but I accept the hon. Gentleman’s point. I ask the Minister to address directly how we reach the demographic that we are talking about and how we ensure that they rightfully get the pardon and, beyond that, the disregard process, which clearly and irrevocably wipes away—

Matthew Pennycook: I have just named an offence—soliciting and importuning—which is not covered by the disregard process. I hope the hon. Gentleman will agree that making a criminal offence is now considered unjust by the House and by society. However, it is not covered by the scope of that process. Does he accept, therefore, that the disregard process has limitations that are addressed in this Bill?

Craig Williams: I listened closely to the hon. Gentleman’s speech. I hope the Minister, too, was listening.

Mr Gyimah rose—

Craig Williams: I see my hon. Friend is about to prove that he was indeed listening.

Mr Gyimah: The hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook) made a passionate speech. On a point of clarification, section 32 of the Sexual Offences Act 1956, to which he referred and which made soliciting and importuning a crime, was repealed in 2004. However, soliciting still remains a crime.

Craig Williams: I will leave that there.

The Liberal Democrat amendment that the Government accepted yesterday brings justice to the issue at pace, with checks and balances.

Callum McCaig (Aberdeen South) (SNP): As Members we must recognise the importance of language. A Policing and Crime Bill is utterly inadequate for dealing with the issue. The language is fundamentally important. On the issue of the living as opposed to the dead, the Government’s position is intellectually and morally bankrupt.

Craig Williams: I have been paying tribute to the tone of the debate, although things seem to be going downhill. What my constituents want is justice and real action, not just words. We can debate rhetoric and words all we want, but my constituents put me here to get justice, and quickly—and yesterday’s agreement to the amendment is the quickest way to achieve that.

I have quietly trod around the issue of this being an England and Wales Bill and my wanting to see the same justice in Scotland. It is okay for SNP Members to question us on rhetoric and action, even though we agree with most of what is being proposed—we are actually changing something—but the Scottish Government need to go at pace as well. I am not going to sit here and take a lot of abuse on this issue when we are debating real action and the Scottish Government, I am afraid, are being quite slow.

Joanna Cherry: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that last year the ILGA—the international lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and intersex association, an international human rights organisation—named Scotland as the best country in Europe in which to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or
transgender? Will he take from that an assurance that the Scottish Government have these matters very much at the forefront of their mind?

Craig Williams: Of course I welcome that, and I hope that the United Kingdom as well as Scotland is seen in that vein around the world, and in respect of every community. I have pleasure in acknowledging Scotland’s achievement, but when you have been in government a while, as the SNP have in Scotland, you have to prove things with actions as well as words. You cannot just look to awards that you have been presented; you will be judged according to the legislation you put through and what has happened. [Interjection.] The fact that hon. Members are quoting political slogans—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. While the debate had a nicer tone, I allowed the “yous” to go unchecked. Will the hon. Gentleman remember that when he says “you”, he is referring to the Chair?

Craig Williams: I apologise unreservedly, Madam Deputy Speaker; I am being stoked by my SNP colleagues while trying to agree with them on a lot of things.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is worth putting on the record that we are having this debate as a result of a raffle, basically—the name of my hon. Friend the Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson) was drawn out of a hat. If a Member of the Scottish Parliament wants to take forward a private Bill, they do it by building consensus, having an open consultation and showing consensus at every stage in the process. That contrast is particularly worth noting in the context of how this debate came about today.

Craig Williams: The hon. Gentleman makes my point for me. You have been in government; you did not need a raffle in Scotland—[Interjection.] Madam Deputy Speaker, you really have me on the ropes now with this “yous”. I will get to my point: the hon. Gentleman has made my point for me. In Scotland, there was no need for a raffle, so you could have done it.

I will now sit down after going back to where I started. I pay absolute tribute to the vast majority of the Bill and to the Government for conceding the amendment yesterday and wanting to see justice. I say again that I am so delighted to be a Member of a Parliament in which we discuss these concepts as alien and seek justice as a result.

12.53 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Before I start, I want to get the sartorial bit of the debate out of the way as quickly as possible. I am not wearing pink because we are discussing gay men’s relationships: today is “wear it pink” day for breast cancer. I would have liked to see hon. Members all in pink. I ask those who came to the event that I hosted—I noted the queue: over 200 MPs came, dressed somewhat flamboyantly in their “wear it pink” photographs—to remember to tweet their photos later.

There has been a lot of humour today, but the issue is serious. Alan Turing was probably the individual who made the single biggest difference to the second world war. It has been estimated that he shortened the war by two years and saved 14 million lives. There were many heroes who suffered, and many heroes who lost their lives, but there is no other person we can identify like that. Unfortunately, for him, of course, what he did at Bletchley Park was secret: he was not a hero, and he was not welcomed with tickertape, given a medal or anything else.

Alan Turing was not charged for having sex with someone under age, having sex in public or behaving in a lewd way. Having been burgled, and having had to call on the public service of the police—when it, of course, became obvious that he lived with his partner—he and his partner were charged with gross indecency. His partner was let off, but Alan Turing ended up pleading guilty under legal advice. He was given the brutal choice of going to prison or facing medical castration. He was injected for a year with diethylstilbestrol, which causes the growth of breast tissue, impotence and depression. It is no little wonder that he took his life with cyanide two years later.

On top of that, one of the things that was probably very important to Alan Turing was that he lost his security clearance. He was allowed, technologically, to stay in his job and to write academic papers, but as a cryptographer—as one of the leaders in developing computer technology—what he did was so much part of him that it was also his identity. Therefore, his identity at work and his identity in his person were removed.

The idea of sexual orientation change efforts has, sadly, not disappeared, and is still practised in many parts of the world. It is still advertised in America, and there are still people in this country—people with healthcare connections—who believe that homosexuality can be cured. Therefore, the idea that we are talking about a parallel to witchcraft from medieval times, and that the issue we are discussing is just technical, is not true. Many people were tortured. Aversion therapy included giving people nausea-inducing drugs while showing them pictures of male homosexual sex. Some people were electrocuted, some were burned and some had all sorts of horrible things done to them. We need to realise that these people were systematically tortured by the state and by health services. That was not that long ago. I was alive when the law changed—a few of us here were. This is not about medieval times. As Stonewall showed in its survey last year, there are still people associated with healthcare practice—perhaps on the edges—who believe these things. We need to be very clear about that.

We have seen the whole approach change. The hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams) was so honest and so moving in talking about how he had changed. That is what we have seen. It is not just a matter of social change; what we do in this place drives social change. Equal marriage has helped to change society. However, the anomaly we are talking about is still here, and a small amendment to the Policing and Crime Bill will simply not do what this Bill does. I am not talking about process; process can be sorted in whatever way necessary in Committee. We should not be arguing on the head of a pin.

Voting this Bill through sends a message. As the hon. Member for Ilford North ( Wes Streeting) said, it is not the case, as the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) said earlier, that being gay is not an issue in schools. Actually, it still is. There are lots of young people hiding it, struggling with it and in pain with it.
we vote against the Bill today, or if we talk it out because of some piece of trickery, the message we send out will be appalling.

We also need to take on our responsibility—I do not talk about this much—for the Commonwealth. We hosted the Commonwealth Games two years ago in Glasgow. In the run-up to them, we had all the discussion about the countries where people are persecuted and imprisoned that are part of the United Kingdom Commonwealth. For the mother of Parliaments, which is heard all across those countries, to talk this Bill out, or to vote it down, sends an appalling message. We have seen how a vote to leave the European Union has empowered people who are in a tiny minority to feel somehow enabled to take actions of race hate or, indeed, homophobia. Our saying, “We don’t think we should do this”, would give exactly the same feeling of empowerment across the country.

I am sorry, but the two things are not equivalent. It is not just a matter of speed—of taking a few months. These men have waited five decades. We should do them the honour of trying to get it right and get the biggest impact. People have campaigned, and not just for Alan Turing. We have pardoned him, but it is our job to make sure that all the other silent heroes who have suffered in the past are pardoned as well. I call on Conservative Members not to use some technical thing to oppose this or feel uncomfortable about supporting it. Abstaining will not do it; voting against it will not do it. We as a House need to send this through with a massive majority so that our voice cannot be ignored in any part of the world.

1 pm

Jeremy Quin (Horsham) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the powerful speech by the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) and the speech by the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook). I spoke after the latter when we both made our maiden speeches. He made a thoughtful speech then and has done so today. Above all, I compliment the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson) on his excellent speech. He brought personal experience, passion and even humour to a very serious subject. As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) said, he may go down in history in association with this Bill. In any event, he has gone down in the annals of this place as the person who transformed Edwina Currie—no mean feat.

Like the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire, I too was born in the ’60s, although clearly I am less well informed. It did seem extraordinary, and am pleased to hear that that was the case, although I know that the hon. and learned Lady will think that symbolism is also very important.

That it took so long is an indictment in itself, but the laws passed in here in ’67 started a long process that continued in 2015 with the Government’s welcome removal, in the Armed Forces Act 2016, of homosexuality as a ground for discharging a member of the armed forces. Changes in legislation, I hope and believe, have not only reflected a changing mood in the British people but, as the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire said, helped to reinforce and lead a change in mood—a profound change for the better.

By background, I am a historian, if a much less professional one than some of those who grace the Benches on both sides of this House. I would like to say that studying British history produces nothing other than a cosy Whiggite reassurance of the inevitable progress of a great nation, with improvements in economic, social and welfare provisions, a shift in sensibility, a growing liberal acceptance of our differences, and the humane adaption of the law—well, up to a point. However, no one can read social history and not be appalled by the attitudes of our forebears so often entrenched in laws passed by this House. Nowhere is historic injustice more apparent than in the attitude that in every aspect of life, the state had a role, and indeed an obligation, to legislate for personal morality—an attitude that Wolfenden had to fight to change. That had direct inhumane consequences, such as the offences under discussion this morning, as well as indirect victims, perhaps most poignantly those affected by the bastardy laws.

I was shocked by the speech of the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). I was shocked not only by the fact that he was once a Conservative—that was a welcome revelation—but by what he said about Neville Chamberlain, whom I had always rather admired. Neville Chamberlain was the person who came to this House in 1920 with legislation, which was challenging at the time, to reform the Bastardy Acts. The fact that he took the inhumane step of attacking his own Back Benchers for being homosexual shocks me, and it was a case of double standards.

We can wonder what our predecessors were thinking, but it is perhaps more sobering to consider what our successors might think of us. The historical events that we are discussing lead to a genuine and difficult dilemma. It is the role of this House to overturn injustice, to condemn bad laws and to lead the way against prejudice, but my fear in the past has been that to attempt to address all the wrongs would be an all-encompassing and overwhelming burden for the House. Focusing too much on redressing the problems of the old might prevent us from being a forward-looking Chamber doing what is needful to build a modern country. [Hon. Members: “Hear, hear.”] Hon. Members may be disappointed by what I say next. I had hoped that for those convicted of...
an historical offence, although it would not heal the pain of conviction or have a practical impact on the experience of having a criminal record, the knowledge that they remain an offence on the date that it becomes law. The Bill also makes clear the requirement for consent.

My understanding is that the Government’s concern that offences that would automatically be pardoned under the Bill may not have passed the tests required under the 2012 disregard provisions. I appreciate that the Government have a difficult path to walk and would not wish to send the wrong message from this place; I am sure that they would not wish to impugn those seeking a pardon because of some isolated cases. I appreciate that the Sharkey amendment, which itself could be amended in this place, may be a less symbolic or glamourous way of securing the changes that I believe nearly all of us want to see, but it may be the most effective. Having said that, the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire produced a possible route for addressing the Government’s concerns in Committee. I look forward to the Minister’s winding up speech.

1.10 pm

Philip Davies (Shipley) (Con): I commend the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson) on bringing forward this Bill. May I give particular praise to a number of speeches we have heard in the Chamber today? It is unfair to single people out, but I am going to, because I think there have been some brilliant speeches. I will highlight four: those of the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire himself; the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) and my hon. Friends the Members for Milton Keynes South (Iain Stewart) and for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams). They all made fantastic contributions to the debate in their own different ways.

I will say at the start that, despite what I would say is my rather unfair reputation, I have no intention of taking the clock down to 2.30 pm today. I am as keen to hear from the Minister as everyone else. But it is important that those of us who do not particularly support the Bill have an opportunity to express why. We have heard today that everyone agrees and shares the same sentiment—I will make this clear right from the word go—of the principles involved here as far as I see them; if we are asking whether the fact that someone is gay should ever rise to an obvious dilemma. Many hundreds of exceptional men were convicted of similar offences, as were more men who were not exceptional; they were normal, average people going about their lives. How can one be pardoned and not the rest? It is one thing to say to anyone convicted of an offence that they have been subject to grievous historical injustice but they are not alone, for they are in honoured company, but as soon as we start removing the honoured company because they are somehow special, the argument falls. It was right and proper to recognise the injustice done to Alan Turing, so it must—made it clear that the Conservative party stood full square behind the principle of seeking reform in this area. I welcome the fact that that commitment is being made real in the other place with amendments tabled in Committee to the Policing and Crime Bill by the noble Lord Sharkey. The Government support those amendments, which substantially reproduce clauses 3(2)(c) and 3(3) of the Bill we are debating by amending the 2012 Act.

I am delighted that whether or not this Bill makes it on to the statute book, we will have the benefit of belt and braces. Some good will come of this debate. I again congratulate the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire on introducing the Bill. It is generous of him to use his slot to introduce legislation that would have an impact only on England and Wales, and which would therefore be less likely to have an impact on his constituents. That speaks volumes about his commitment to and passion for the subject.

I understand that, however well-intentioned the Bill, the Government believe it suffers from technical flaws and that in particular it may lead to pardons automatically being granted to individuals who committed acts that remain illegal. I appreciate that Bill’s proposer has attempted to address those concerns in clause 1 and clause 2(4)(c), which specifically state that offences will be excluded from the provisions of the Bill in the event that they remain an offence on the date that it becomes law. The Bill also makes clear the requirement for consent.
gay person should ever have to come out. Of course they should not. People's sexual orientation is absolutely irrelevant. The moment when this country gets to the stage when sexual orientation is an irrelevance cannot come soon enough in my opinion. Like the hon. Lady, I look forward to the day when no one ever has to come out as gay.

The hon. Lady's second point, specifically in relation to the Bill, was very powerful and is something that the Government might wish to consider; I would not say that it has changed my mind about the Bill, but it has certainly weighed heavily with me. As she said, this Bill having its Second Reading, going into Committee, then coming back for Report and Third Reading would inevitably mean that these issues gain more scrutiny in the House than if an amendment were simply accepted in the House of Lords and came back to the Commons for a debate of an hour or two, maximum—perhaps not even that—and was in effect nodded through without any further scrutiny. There is some merit in that point. The Government might want to consider it. I had not given it much thought before, but I thought she made that point very well.

I must say that when I first heard about this Bill, my initial reaction was to think that it sounded as if it should be titled, "The Re-writing of History Bill"—a concept with which I am not generally comfortable. Plenty of ugly, evil and wrong things have happened in the past, but they are what they are. It is very easy for us in the House today to criticise people who were here in the past—I did it at the start of my speech when I said that these things should never have been a crime—but there will be things that we pass in this House with the best of intentions about which MPs will doubtless come along in 100 years' time and say, "It is absolutely disgusting that they passed those laws and offences at that time, and they should have been ashamed of themselves for doing it".

We should always be slightly wary of imposing our modern-day judgments on the past—it is easy to do, but not always fair to the people who made decisions on the basis of what they thought were in the best interests of the country at the time. We obviously think they were wrong, but they thought they were doing what was right at the time.

Dr Philippa Whitford: Does the hon. Gentleman not think that we should be a bit more concerned with people who are still alive and suffering, rather than our own vainglory in the future when we are dead?

Philip Davies: I was coming on to that point. The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire made a fair point in that respect, but if the hon. Lady will forgive me, I shall come on to deal with her point in a few moments.

I was saying that we should be wary of getting into the habit—it seems that we are already in it—of always being anxious to apologise for things that other people have done in the past. Unlike my hon. Friend, the Member for Selby and Ainsty, who is clearly a notable exception, we rarely apologise for the things that we have done. I suspect that the public are usually keener for us to apologise for the mistakes that we have made rather than taking the easy option of apologising for the mistakes that we think people made hundreds of years ago. Tony Blair is a prime example. He was very keen to apologise for slavery that somebody else had done hundreds of years previously, but he would not apologise for the mess he left in Iraq following the Iraq war. I suspect that most people would regard it as more worth while for him to apologise for the decisions that he took, rather than for the decisions that others took many years previously. I do not generally like that particular approach to politics, but I leave it there.

Although my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff North (Craig Williams) was slightly chastised for it, I think he was absolutely right to pull up our friends from the Scottish National party for coming here and chastising the Minister for introducing something late in the day, going very slowly and all the rest of it. The Bill applies only to England and Wales, and the Minister is going virtually all the way that the SNP would like him to go—not fully, I appreciate, but he is going an awful long way to meet their requests. It is slightly churlish of SNP Members not to have given the Minister more credit for that.

Moreover, the Scottish Administration have not introduced this law, even though they have had plenty of opportunity to do so. It would be interesting to carry out a freedom of information request to see how many letters the Scottish Government have received from SNP MPs about introducing this particular law in the Scottish Parliament. SNP Members should be wary of criticising this Government, who have clearly gone a lot further than the SNP Administration have in Scotland. A bit of humility on that particular point would not have gone amiss.

On the substance, I said that the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire made a good point—it was a rhetorical flourish, but still a good point—when he said that we should be more concerned about the living than the dead. There is something in that. The problem is that once we start going down this route, it becomes difficult to stop the juggernaut in its process. It can become difficult if people try to draw distinctions. For example, once we have pardoned Dr Alan Turing—I have not heard anyone say that that should not have happened—it becomes an intellectual nonsense to deprive other people of the same pardon who were convicted of exactly the same offences but did not have such an exciting life and achieve as much in their jobs as he did. Dr Alan Turing's sexuality is irrelevant to his achievements. It should not have been because of his achievements that he was pardoned; he was pardoned for something which, as far as I can see, was irrelevant to them, and if he is pardoned for that, it becomes very difficult not to pardon other people.

I think the point that the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire was rightly making is that once the Government have accepted that people who are deceased should be pardoned, it then becomes very difficult intellectually to ask why the same should not apply to people who are still alive. That is a fair point, and I look forward to hearing the Minister's response to it.

Stewart Hosie (Dundee East) (SNP): I understand the hon. Gentleman's point about the juggernaut and the various stages that might ensue. However, as my hon. Friend made clear in his speech, this is essentially a
victimless crime. What possible harm can it do—rather than good, of course—to pardon people who, in essence, committed no crime at all?

Philip Davies: I do not disagree with the hon. Gentleman’s sentiment, and I made that clear at the outset. My point is that the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire has selected a certain group of offences. My hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Craig Whittaker) made a very fair point, which people ought to consider. In the past, many other offences have been committed which I would term victimless crimes.

Stewart Hosie: Such as?

Philip Davies: The metric martyrs are a prime example. Steve Thoburn sadly died with a criminal conviction for selling produce in imperial measures. That, I would argue, was a victimless crime. The customers were perfectly happy to buy the produce and Steve Thoburn was happy to sell it. There was no victim, but he died with a criminal conviction. He still has a criminal conviction. He has not been posthumously pardoned.

John Nicolson: I am sorry, but I am struggling to make the connection with the metric martyrs, whom I do not recall being chemically castrated, arrested or tortured. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman will remind me of that detail, which I have forgotten.

Philip Davies: I was not aware that the hon. Gentleman’s Bill applied only to people who had been chemically castrated and tortured. Is he now saying that that is the case? The point that he is making is a complete nonsense, and he must know that. I was responding to an intervention from the hon. Member for Dundee East (Stewart Hosie), who asked whether there were any examples of victimless crimes committed by people who had a criminal record and had not been pardoned, and I gave him a perfectly good example. Moreover, he was nodding in agreement when I gave him that example. [Interruption.] The Scottish National party has become so dominant in Scotland that SNP Members are not used to hearing alternative opinions. I am sorry that they are so intolerant of anyone who holds a different opinion from theirs. It does not reflect well on them.

My point is this. I think that the Bill would have been easier to justify if it had included all past offences and all past convictions for crimes which are no longer crimes, and which were victimless. That would have been a perfectly logical thing to do. I think it is very difficult to pick out only certain crimes to justify the Bill, rather than including all convictions for offences of that kind.

Lyn Brown: I am genuinely grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. At the beginning of his speech, he informed us that we might not be listening to one of his lengthy contributions, and said that he would sit down shortly in order to enable the Front Benchers to present their arguments. May I ask how long he thinks he might be? I ask simply because I want to put on record, very forcefully, the support of the Opposition Front Bench for the Bill, and I am worried that I shall not be able to get to my feet in order to do so.

Philip Davies: We have an hour and five minutes left. About three hours have been taken up by people speaking in favour of the Bill. I have fielded four or five interventions during my brief comments so far. If people do not intervene on my speech, I will be able to get through it a bit quicker. It would be a sad state of affairs and a sad day for our democracy if the only speeches that were allowed to be heard in a debate were those in favour of the Bill. I am not sure if that is what the hon. Lady is arguing for. She has put on record her support for the Bill, and if she wants to say any more, she is very welcome to do so.

I am going to conclude my remarks, but it is important that the concerns that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe had while in government, which my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs described earlier, should be given a hearing. Legislation of this kind, and even the measure that the Government have agreed to in the Lords, will open up the probability of, and certainly the justification for, pardoning people who have been convicted of other crimes that are no longer criminal offences, and which we do not believe should be criminal offences, particularly those that were victimless crimes.

I hope that the Minister will address this point and tell us whether the Government intend to go further down this route, or whether they intend to finish here with these particular offences, in which case I would like to hear the logic behind that. For example, there are people who were found guilty of attempting to commit suicide when it was a criminal offence to do so. Are they not worthy of a pardon? I do not see why we should cherry-pick certain offences when there is a whole range of others that could be added to the list. People should be able to express these views.

I shall conclude my remarks, Madam Deputy Speaker, because I did promise you and the House that I would not speak for a great length of time. I think we all agree with the sentiment behind the Bill. Should these offences ever have been crimes? Obviously not. Should we think any less of the people who were convicted of them? No, we should not. But we cannot pass laws in this House that are simply based on worthy sentiment. Nor can we pass laws simply to send out a signal or some kind of message, despite the fact that we have heard this intention expressed in almost every speech so far today. If we want to send a message or a signal, that should be done by making a speech. Passing legislation is a very different thing.

The question should be whether this is the right kind of legislation. Should we go over these cases again? Will the Minister tell us how easy it will be to go through every single case in order to ascertain whether the activity that took place at the time still constitutes an offence today? For example, certain activities carried out in public still constitute an offence today. How will we know, when we look back over the records, whether a particular offence took place in public and would therefore still constitute an offence today? If that detail was not relevant to the prosecution at the time, it might never have been logged.

We should not underestimate the practical difficulties that will be involved, and I hope that the Minister will be able to explain how they will be dealt with. When we pass legislation, it should involve practical things that have to happen rather than worthy sentiments, and I
1.30 pm

Mr David Nuttall (Bury North) (Con): It is fair to say that we have had an extensive debate with many excellent speeches. My hon. Friend the Member for Shipley (Philip Davies) picked out four of them and I agree with all those choices. I particularly enjoyed the entertaining, moving and informative speech of the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). I am sure the whole House enjoyed it, too.

I genuinely congratulate the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson) on winning the private Members’ Bill ballot. Some Members who have been in the House for many more years than he has have entered many times without enjoying the same success. Without wanting to sour that genuine note of congratulation, it was noted that the Bill was published very late in the day.

Mr Gyimah: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way so early in his speech. A number of questions have been asked about a blanket pardon for the living, including; “Why don’t the Government just go ahead and do it?”

I understand that there might be a closure motion, so I want to put it on the record that the crime was gross indecency and that many other crimes were prosecuted at a much higher level. Therefore, we could be granting a pardon to people who are ostensibly guilty of gross indecency, but some elements of that are still crimes today and go far beyond the scope of the Bill. That is why the Government propose a disregard process for the living followed by a statutory pardon.

Mr Nuttall: I do not think that intervention calls for a response from me. The Minister wanted to place that comment on the record and has done so.

To finish the remark I was making, I hope that, when the time comes, the House accepts, as the Government have, the Procedure Committee’s recommendation that the deadline for printing a Bill... be brought forward to the Wednesday of the week prior to the day of the second reading.”

The hon. Member for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) reminded us of the irony that the first ever private Member’s Bill brought by a member of the Scottish National party extends only to England and Wales. That will not be lost on anyone. It is a smart move by the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire because it sends a signal—the Bill is all about sending signals—that everything in his constituency is fantastic. There must be no problems in East Dunbartonshire that require a legislative solution. Thousands of people will be rushing to live there.

It is worth considering that the situation in Scotland is different from that in England and Wales. As we know, criminal law operates on a different basis there. Dr Jeffrey Meek, a lecturer in economic and social history at the University of Glasgow, published an article on 23 February last year on the “Queer Scotland” website, which specialises in articles on the history and culture of the lesbian and gay community in Scotland. The article was entitled “The 49,000: ‘Pardons & Homosexual Offences’, a Scottish Perspective”. The 49,000 figure is an estimate of the number of men prosecuted for gross indecency and other historical crimes. Dr Meek wrote:

“Unlike what occurred in England there were relatively few successful prosecutions for private consensual sex between adult males north of the border during the 20th century; indeed it was a policy of successive Lords Advocate in Scotland not to prosecute private, consensual sex between men.”

Does that mean that no men were prosecuted on account of their being gay? As Dr Meek pointed out in his article:

“The main focus of the law was upon men who engaged in sex in public spaces: in ‘cottages’, tenement closes, parks; and men who sold sex on the streets of Scotland’s urban centres. This was not the result of ‘liberal thinking’ but was chiefly the result of evidential requirements under Scots Law.”

Mike Weir claimed to move the closure (Standing Order No. 36).

Question put forthwith. That the Question be now put.

The House divided: Ayes 57, Noes 0.

Division No. 71]  

AYES

| ABBOTT, MS DIANE | CHERRY, JOANNA |
| ABRAHAMS, DEBBIE | COWAN, RONNIE |
| ADAMS, NIGEL | CRAWLEY, ANGELA |
| AHMED-SHEIKH, MS TASMINA | DAY, MARTYN |
| ARKLASS, RICHARD | DOCHERTY-HUGHES, MARTIN |
| BARDELL, HANNAH | EAGLE, MS ANGELA |
| BLUNT, CRISPIN | ELMORE, CHRIS |
| BONE, MR PETER | FELLOWS, MARION |
| BRENNAN, KEVIN | FERIER, MARGARET |
| BROCK, DEIDRE | FITZPATRICK, JIM |
| BROWN, ALAN | GETHINS, STEPHEN |
| BROWN, LYN | GRADY, PATRICK |
| BROWN, RH MR NICHOLAS | GRANT, PETER |
| BRYANT, CHRIS | HENDRY, DREW |
| BURGON, RICHARD | HERBERT, RH NICK |
| BUTLER, DAWN | HOLLOBONE, MR PHILIP |
Mr Nuttall: I am grateful that the House decided it wishes to hear some more from me this morning, but I will try to keep my remarks short nevertheless. I cannot understand why the House would want to end my speech.

I have one or two specific things to say about the Bill before we hear from the Minister, as I am sure the whole House wishes to do before very long. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Shipley, my primary concern about the Bill is that it attempts to rewrite history. We should not assume everybody who is gay thinks that it is a good idea. Mention was made earlier—by the Bill's promoter, not assume everybody who is gay thinks that it is a good idea. As we have heard a number of Members say, many things have happened in our history that we all wish had not happened, but we have to take history as we find it; we have to accept that the past was as it was and not how we perhaps would have it if we could rewrite that history today.

The Bill is unnecessary in many regards. We should not assume everybody who is gay thinks that it is a good idea. Mention was made earlier—by the Bill's promoter, not assume everybody who is gay thinks that it is a good idea. As we have heard a number of Members say, many things have happened in our history that we all wish had not happened, but we have to take history as we find it; we have to accept that the past was as it was and not how we perhaps would have it if we could rewrite that history today.

The same point applies to the proposal that the Minister wants to be introduced in the other place. It was not clear when I read the press release whether those who apply for a disregard will be granted an automatic pardon or whether they will be given the option of ticking a box on the application form to say, "Yes, I also want a pardon." There may be others like Mr Montague who say, "I want the disregard, but I don't want the pardon because I don't accept that I did anything wrong."

Many more things could be said about the Bill, but I said that I would allow time to hear from the Front Benchers and I intend to do that. I look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say.

1.54 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I had written a much longer and obviously well-crafted speech, full of pearls of wisdom and eloquence, but as I want to give the Minister an opportunity not only to be heard but, I hope, even at this late stage to accept this Bill or at the very least indicate that he will go from this House today and engage in genuine discussions about amendments to the Bill that will make it acceptable to the Government. I shall not speak for as long as I had intended. I and so many more people in the House and elsewhere will be disappointed if the Government do not show themselves to make a genuine effort to meet those concerns.

Roughly 75,000 men were prosecuted for gross indecency between 1885 and the partial legalisation of homosexuality in 1967. Thousands more had to live their lives in secrecy and fear, and to hide who they were, for risk of prosecution. It was inhumane and unjust. The pain caused by these indecency laws can never be undone, and the relationships and lives that were lost can never be recovered, but this Bill does what we can do, which is to partly correct a grave injustice. The Bill grants a pardon to those convicted of sexual offences for acts that are no longer criminalised. It is our way of recognising that we made a mistake, that we caused trauma among innocents, and that we ruined lives. Inadequate though it may be, it is our only way of saying sorry.

We have heard many moving tributes today to Alan Turing and others whom the laws drove to their death, and it is rightly a source of national shame, but Alan Turing was just one wronged gay man among thousands. The British state owes an apology and a pardon to the ordinary men who were criminalised for being who they were, just as much as it owed an apology to Alan Turing. After all, we apologised to Turing not only because he is a national hero, though he clearly is, but because he patently did nothing wrong.
To be fair to the Government, in the past they have recognised that these convictions were wrong. They not only granted the pardon to Turing, but in 2012 they passed the Protection of Freedoms Act. That Act allowed those with convictions under these indecency laws to apply for their conviction to be disregarded and effectively expunged from the record, so long as their application is approved by the Secretary of State. The disregard scheme was a welcome development, particularly as it allowed those prosecuted under these uncivilised laws to apply for work without the blight of a criminal record, but it does not go far enough.

The disregard scheme relies upon the victims of injustice making an application themselves. Relatives of the deceased cannot make applications on behalf of their family member, nor, obviously, can the deceased apply for a disregard themselves. It is therefore of no use to the families of the approximately 50,000 men who were prosecuted for gross indecency and who are now deceased. The Minister must know of the pain that exists in families long after the event, and that families sometimes need the closure that this Bill would allow.

The disregard scheme puts the onus on those who are living to go out and apply for their conviction to be disregarded. I want to stress that, for many, going through the disregard process opens up so many old wounds, and reminds them of a time in their life that they may well wish to put behind them. I imagine that at this point in their life they do not wish to rake up all that old hurt, pain, humiliation and fear. It must be enormously stressful. The onus should be on the legislators to take action, because it is the law that was wrong.

The Bill before us deals with these problems. Clause 2 automatically grants a pardon to all those convicted of a list of sexual offences that have since been repealed. It is really important that the Minister grasps that point. Clause 3 will allow family members of the deceased to apply for a disregard. If the Bill is enacted, all those convicted under those laws would be pardoned whether they were living or deceased and all could go through the disregard process if a family member wished to pursue that.

On Wednesday, the Government signed an amendment to the Policing and Crime Bill in the Lords that would achieve most, but not all, those things. Lord Sharkey’s amendment would grant a pardon to all the deceased who had been charged under the relevant offences, but not—and this is crucial—to the living. The living would have to apply for a disregard and only then would they be granted a pardon. The onus would be placed right back on the victims of injustice, which, I worry, rather reduces the quality of the apology being offered.

The Minister explained the Government’s approach to the press. He said:

“A blanket pardon, without the detailed investigations carried out by the Home Office under the disregard process, could see people guilty of an offence which is still a crime today claiming to be pardoned. This would cause an extraordinary and unnecessary amount of distress to victims”.

None in this House would want there to be a pardon for anyone guilty of serious sexual offences, but I am a little confused by the Government’s reasoning. The private Member’s Bill, as drafted, relies on a list of sexual offences for which someone is granted a pardon, none of which is a crime any longer. It also contains a separate clause that clearly states:

“Nothing in this Act is to be interpreted as pardoning, disregarding or in any other way affecting cautions, convictions, convictions or any other consequences of convictions or cautions for conduct or behaviour that is unlawful on the date that the Act comes into force.”

Given those safeguards, it is not clear to me how the Bill would lead to pardons for those guilty of an offence that is still a crime today—unless the Minister merely means that people will be able falsely and deceptively to claim to have been pardoned when they have not been.

Craig Whittaker: Something is not clear to me. If someone has previously been committed of having under-age sex, for example, how can we today determine whether such a previous conviction is still a crime? Anyone having sex with a minor today is committing a crime. However, that would not be clear from past criminal activity.

Lyn Brown: The Bill is really clear: if a past offence is an offence today, there will be no pardon. Having sex with somebody under-age is still an offence. Anybody who committed an offence that is still an offence today would clearly not be pardoned.

Craig Whittaker rose—

Lyn Brown: I will not give way again; I am coming to a conclusion and I genuinely think we should hear from the Minister. However, I say to the hon. Gentleman that the issue is not sufficient to warrant rejection of the Bill. We should be taking the Bill through Committee. If there are genuine problems of wording, it can be amended. If what the hon. Gentleman raises remains an issue, the Bill can be amended. That is what the Committee and Report stages are for—it is what we do here all the time.

If the Bill is imperfect, let us perfect it in Committee. That is where we do things such as this. Why is this Bill any different? None of us disagrees with the principles behind the Bill. The Minister is worried about unintended consequences. That can be dealt with. Let us take the Bill to Committee, change it and make it fit for purpose. I urge the Minister, even at this very last moment, to allow the Bill into Committee, where we can change it if necessary and bring it back for this House to pass.

2.4 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Mr Sam Gyimah): I thank the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson) for bringing this important issue to the House. I also thank Stonewall and other groups that have campaigned vigorously on LGBT issues over the years, and to which we owe a lot of credit for the progress that has been made.

There have been some fantastic speeches today. I will not go through all of them, but I would like to single out the speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty (Nigel Adams). As he said, it is not usual for Yorkshiremen to admit they have made mistakes, but it is even less usual for politicians to admit that. He very graciously came out of the closet in favour of same-sex marriage in his speech.
Hannah Bardell: In saying those words, does the Minister not recognise that, in years to come, he may well reflect on the words he is about to say and that he is perhaps about to get it wrong?

Mr Gyimah: I have done a number of these private Members’ Bills on Fridays, and it is very unusual to be doing one where the choice before the House is not the private Member’s Bill or no Bill at all, but the private Member’s Bill or a legislative vehicle—the Police and Crime Bill—that will help us achieve our aims much faster so that we can deliver justice. However, there is also an important point. It is not for nothing that they say, “You campaign in poetry, but you govern in prose.” Intentions are not good enough when it comes to making law; we have to think through the unintended consequences of law, and that is what the Government’s approach tries to do.

Philip Davies: Perhaps the Minister would also like to make the point that if 100 MPs out of 650 had turned up to support the Bill, it would have got its Second Reading without any trouble at all. The problem is that it does not have the support of 100 MPs.

Mr Gyimah: We did not have 100 MPs go through the Division Lobby earlier. We have also had a substantial debate in which people in favour of the private Member’s Bill have spoken for well over three hours.

Wes Streeting: Because we have had so many contributions, time is short. The last time I was here for a private Member’s Bill with the Minister, he—entirely inadvertently, I am sure—talked it out. He still has over 20 minutes to address the issues. Can he commit to concluding his remarks so that we can have a vote on the Second Reading? Otherwise, it will not be his friends who are blamed for talking the Bill out. His words will ring hollow if he is the one who talks it out.

Mr Gyimah: I can commit to setting out the Government’s case clearly and comprehensively. As I said, the choice before us is not this Bill or no action at all.

I was proud to announce yesterday the introduction of legislation posthumously to pardon thousands of gay and bisexual men convicted of now-abolished sexual offences. Not enough has been said of what was a big challenge for 50 years. Homosexuality was decriminalised in 1967. Yesterday’s announcement was one of the biggest steps that has been taken since then, and it has been taken by this Government.

The issue was brought home to me when my office received a phone call from a lady whose stepbrother was convicted under these archaic anti-gay laws. She was so delighted that their shared mother, who was close to 100, has lived to see her stepbrother pardoned. That is a momentous step. To those who are making out—that they are tweeting at the moment—that, somehow, the Government are not being progressive in this area, I say that the truth is that the Government are not dragging their feet or being hesitant in taking action.

The Government’s legislative vehicle will deliver what we all want, which is to right this historic wrong quicker than any other method. By using a Government vehicle, we protect these measures from filibustering and from the vagaries of parliamentary time, and ensure that they get on to the statute book.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Gyimah: If you want me to finish, you might as well allow me to get through my speech.

In 2012, we introduced changes to the law to clear anyone still living and previously convicted of these now-abolished offences under the Home Office disregard process. Disregarding is a powerful tool in changing lives, as it removes any mention of a criminal offence. However, our announcement means that we will go one step further and introduce a new statutory pardon for those who have successfully had offences deleted through the disregard process.

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): The number of convictions compared with the number of people who have taken up the offer of disregards is very low. Do the Government have any plans to publicise the disregard programme so that more people could take up that option?

Mr Gyimah: My hon. Friend makes a very powerful point.

In the Government’s scheme, the living do not get a blanket pardon but apply for a disregard process. At the start of this debate, I offered to work with the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire, MOJ officials and the Home Office to make sure that the disregard process is as effective as it can be. In addressing this, we need to think not only about those who were unjustly convicted of a crime but potential victims. Not having a disregard process and offering a blanket pardon means that we do not take into account the needs of potential victims.

Mike Weir: I do not quite understand the Minister’s point. It is possible that someone who is now deceased and gets an automatic pardon is in exactly the same position as someone who is still alive, and there could be a potential victim there, so why is he making this strange distinction between the two?

Mr Gyimah: It is a very important point, and the answer is very simple. Someone who is living who received the blanket pardon could volunteer in a school where they committed something that is still an offence—for example, sex with a minor—so there is a bigger onus on us to get this right.

Mike Weir rose—

Joanna Cherry rose—

Mr Gyimah: I will take your interventions in a moment, but may I first develop my argument?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. I remind the Minister that when he says “you”, he is referring to the Chair. In these sorts of heated debates, things can get quite direct. It is important to remember that rule, especially when it gets a bit heated.
Mr Gyimah: That is very good advice, Madam Deputy Speaker. I would not want to drag you into this debate.

The Government will pardon those who tragically died before they ever saw this injustice tackled. In response to the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), who made a very passionate speech, it is a matter of deep regret that so many men went to their graves without the pardon they so rightly deserved. That is why we are so determined as a Government to deliver justice, as I have said, by the most swift and fair means possible. The Government will support Lord Sharkey’s amendment to the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012 through the Policing and Crime Bill. Lord Sharkey is a Liberal Democrat peer. He is no stooge of the Government—the days of coalition are long over—and, like many Members here, including the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire, he has been campaigning for this measure for a very long time. I am pleased that he will be taking forward the Government’s measures on this.

I am also pleased that the measures have been widely welcomed. Nick Duffy, the editor of “PinkNews”, said:

“There is a whole discussion around semantics but the bigger issue, I think, is that men who are alive today now have the option to finally have it on paper, that they didn’t do anything wrong, that these laws were a mistake and never should have been. It sends a message within our country that these laws were totally wrong, that we regret them, and that they should never have been on the books”.

David Isaac, the chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, has said of the Government’s approach:

“This is an important day for all those that have had criminal convictions through old unjust laws. Many people have campaigned for gay men to be pardoned after being prosecuted for being who they are and I applaud the government for fulfilling their commitment.”

Those are quotes from independent people who have been campaigning for these measures for a long time, and they recognise that the steps the Government are taking will deliver justice in a fast and fair way.

Joanna Cherry: The Minister said earlier that his objection to the Bill was that it gave out a blanket pardon that might cover unlawful conduct. May I give him comfort by telling him that that is not the case? Clause I states:

“Nothing in this Act is to be interpreted as pardoning, disregarding or in any other way affecting convictions, cautions, sentences or any other consequences of convictions or cautions for conduct or behaviour that is unlawful on the date that the Act comes into force.”

How could it be clearer? In addition, clause 2(4) states that the conditions for a pardon are that the other person must have consented and that they must not have been under the age of 16. Those provisions answer the Minister’s concerns. Will he have the decency to admit that the Government are wrong about this, and that the Bill tackles the issues that he is raising?

Mr Gyimah: The truth is that the offence of which these men were convicted was gross indecency, which covered a whole range of criminal offences. The blanket pardon will cover everyone who was convicted of gross indecency.

Joanna Cherry: Will the Minister give way?
was then Justice Secretary, following a high-profile campaign supported by more than 37,000 people, including Stephen Hawking.

As has been said, we know that Alan Turing is just one of the estimated 49,000 people who were unjustly convicted under those laws. Those unjust convictions are a matter of the deepest regret. They were for criminal offences as the law stood at the time. I am delighted that we will be delivering on our manifesto commitment to pardon those men and right those wrongs. The legislation the Government have announced will do two things to address the historical injustices faced by gay and bisexual men. In the case of deceased persons, it will provide for a blanket posthumous pardon to be given to those individuals who were convicted of consensual gay sexual offences that would not be offences today; those are primarily offences under the Sexual Offences Act 1956. As Lord Sharkey has said, “a pardon is probably the best way of acknowledging the real harm done by the unjust and cruel homophobic laws, which thankfully we’ve now repealed.”

In the case of those individuals who are still living, it will provide that all who are successful in obtaining a disregard—I will explain the disregard process in a little more detail in a moment—will be granted a pardon, so that they get both a disregard, to expunge their record, and a pardon. That will apply to previous and future disregards.

Under the Protection of Freedoms Act 2012, individuals can apply to the Home Secretary to have their historical convictions for gay sex offences—primarily those under sections 12 and 13 of the Sexual Offences Act 1956—deleted. Officials check police national computer records and then local police and court records, to ascertain whether the offences were consensual, were with a person aged 16 or over and did not involve activity that is currently an offence. A successful applicant will be treated in all circumstances as though the offence had never occurred and need not disclose it for any purpose. Official records relating to the conviction that are held by prescribed organisations will be deleted or, where appropriate, annotated to that effect. The existence of those convictions or cautions may have prevented individuals from taking up certain opportunities in their lives or made them uneasy about going into certain professions or volunteering, because the information would have been revealed in a criminal records check.

**Mike Weir:** Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Gyimah:** I need to press on.

Although it is right that the state enables the vulnerable to be protected from those who pose a risk, it is not right that someone remains affected by a conviction for something that is no longer illegal. The process for the disregard, which has not been discussed in enough detail in this debate, is simple and not bureaucratic. Applicants complete a two-page form giving basic information such as their name and address and the details of the offence to be disregarded. The applicant also supplies photocopies of proof of address and identity. These can be sent by post or email.

Nothing else is required and the process is free of charge. The outcome of a disregard is a significant step for the individual, who may have had to live with that offence on their record for years.

**George Kerevan** (East Lothian) (SNP): Will the Minister give way?

**Mr Gyimah:** I want to press on.

When a person is successful in obtaining a disregard for a conviction or a caution, that offence is to be treated for all purposes in law as if the person has not committed the offence, been convicted or sentenced or even cautioned. Perhaps this will be of most use to individuals when applying for work or when volunteering for roles that require a criminal records check from the Disclosure and Barring Service. This is incredibly important, because under the disregard process, the offences will quite simply no longer appear on the disclosure, and can have no effect on the person’s chances of obtaining work or the opportunity to volunteer. Any previous barriers will have been removed and the person is no longer affected by the disclosure.

**Craig Whittaker:** To clarify a point, when the age of consent was much higher than today, as it was in 1967, how does the Minister envisage putting checks and balances in place on a blanket pardon where under-age sex has taken place under the age of 16, which is illegal today but is the same charge as when the age of consent was 21?

**Mr Gyimah:** My hon. Friend continues to make a very persuasive case. Yes, we all want a pardon; yes, we all want to right the wrongs of the past, but we cannot do that without the safeguards being inappropriate in cases where people are still living and there are consequences today. To do that would, I believe, be irresponsible on the part of the Government.

**Mike Weir:** In my earlier intervention, the Minister said that his concern was that someone getting a blanket pardon who was still alive could then get a job as a volunteer with children. However, the Bill specifically says that anyone who is still alive and wants the offence expunged from the record has to go through a second procedure. Surely anyone applying for such a job would have to go through a criminal records check, which would show up what was still on the record. I do not see where the difference lies.

**Mr Gyimah:** The hon. Gentleman makes my point about why a disregard step is essential in this process—[Interruption.] May I respond to the hon. Gentleman’s point? The disregard process means that there will not be a situation where someone has been ostensibly pardoned but the criminal record has not been expunged. The disregard process ensures that the criminal record is expunged and the person gets a statutory pardon. I am sure that Members will agree that such a process provides a meaningful avenue for individuals convicted or cautioned for sexual activity that is no longer regarded as an offence.

**Lyn Brown** rose—

**Mr Gyimah:** The hon. Lady has had her time. The process allows people to move on with their lives in a meaningful way.

A disregard is a much more powerful and useful remedy for someone living than just a pardon. We recognise the force of the symbol of being pardoned, which is why we propose to pardon all of those who are
living and were convicted of relevant offences once they have received a disregard. I would urge any individuals who believe that they are eligible for the disregard process to apply through the Home Office to have their records properly assessed. I hope that today’s debate has helped to raise the profile of this process so that those who are not aware can take steps to secure the justice that they deserve.

Of course, I support the intentions behind the Bill; the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire and I share the same objectives. The proposed blanket pardon would not provide for robust checks to ensure that only those who clearly meet the criteria can claim to be pardoned. It could lead in some cases to people claiming to be cleared of offences that are still crimes—including sex with a minor and non-consensual sexual activity. Under the disregard process, for example, the Home Office has rejected several applications where the activity was non-consensual and others where the other party was under 16 years old. Those offences were captured under offences such as “gross indecency” at the time, but are still crimes today. It is important that a pardon for the living takes place only after due process to verify—[Interruption.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Natascha Engel): Order. Enough. Let the Minister finish his speech.

Mr Gyimah rose—

2.30 pm

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Debate to be resumed what day?

John Nicolson: I suspect that there is little point, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I have been told to continue this farce. What I am meant to say is 16 December.

The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 11(2)).

Ordered, That the debate be resumed on Friday 16 December.

REGISTRATION OF MARRIAGE BILL

Motion made, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Hon. Members: Object.

Bill to be read a Second time on Friday 18 November.

Kettering General Hospital

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

2.30 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I wish to draw the Minister’s attention, on behalf of my constituents, to the good work that Kettering general hospital does for the local community, and to the challenges that will confront it in the years ahead. I am grateful to Mr Speaker for granting me permission to open the debate, and I am pleased to see the Minister in his place.

It is a huge privilege for me to be the Member of Parliament for Kettering. I regard Kettering general hospital as one of the pre-eminent issues for all local residents of the town, and I do not hesitate to use every possible parliamentary opportunity to draw the challenges that it faces of the attention of Her Majesty’s Government.

I want to address five main themes: the huge demographic challenge faced by Kettering and its hospital, the challenge posed by ambitious plans for an urgent care hub, which require Government support, the challenge of funding estate development on the hospital site, the problems caused by national IT roll-outs, and the workforce challenges.

People in Kettering are very proud of our local hospital, which has been on its present site for 119 years. Local people have been born there, have been repaired there, and have died there. Everyone is hugely proud of the doctors, nurses and ancillary staff, who do a fantastic job around the clock, day in day out, week in week out, to provide increasingly first-class healthcare for our local community. However, the size of the local community is growing at an unprecedented rate. Over the last census period, Kettering was sixth out of 348 local districts for household growth, and 31st for population growth. The local population is growing at a rate of about 1% a year, but within that, the number of elderly people is growing even faster. Thank goodness we are all living longer, but the number of people aged over 75 in the county of Northamptonshire is likely to rise from just short of 54,000 in 2017 to just short of 72,000 in 2023—and it is members of that cohort who require the most treatment at the hospital and present the biggest challenge.

The good news is that the hospital is raising its game, and is responding. The number of beds was 518 in 2010; it is now 561, having increased by 8%, and is set to increase further to 600 over the next year or so. However, the number of treatments being provided is increasing all the time. In 2004-05, there were 71,300 admitted-patient consultant episodes at the hospital; that rose to just under 91,000 in 2014-15, an increase of 27%. The number of out-patient attendances rose from 168,412 in 2004-05 to 274,614 in 2014-15, an increase of 63%. The accident and emergency figures show a 23% increase from 67,500 in 2010-11 to 83,000 now, in an A&E department that was built 20 years ago and designed to treat just 40,000 people. The pressures on the hospital are unprecedented. The funding provided by Her Majesty’s Government to the local clinical commissioning groups through NHS England is going up, but the Government have admitted that it is still short of the target amount.
Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this important debate. Does he agree that one of the frustrations for the people of north Northamptonshire is that the Government have a formula for how much money we should get but they do not give us that amount because they overfund elsewhere? That frustration is felt across the whole of north Northamptonshire.

Mr Hollobone: You will know, Madam Deputy Speaker, that my hon. Friend has a great way of simplifying complex issues to make them readily understandable. His intervention is just another example of that.

NHS England has told Her Majesty’s Government that it is targeting the clinical commissioning groups that are more than 5% above or below the target funding, that both Nene and Corby CCGs are underfunded, and that the cash increase of 5.2% for Nene and 9.4% for Corby in 2016-17 will bring us within that 5% zone. This suggests that we are outside it at the moment. The fact that we are more than 5% away from the target funding and that we have one of the most rapidly increasing populations in the country illustrates the stiff challenge that Kettering general hospital faces.

Tom Pursglove (Corby) (Con): Residents in Corby and elsewhere in east Northamptonshire are proud of their hospital, as are my hon. Friend’s constituents in Kettering. One of the challenges that goes with a growth agenda is the need for new infrastructure to support new homes. Does he agree that the new urgent care hub in north Northamptonshire, which we are all campaigning for, will be crucial not only for securing health services in our area, taking the pressure off A&E and meeting the growing needs of new residents moving into our area, but for meeting the Government’s agenda on the better integration of health services?

Mr Hollobone: One of the advantages of working closely with my fellow Members of Parliament is that we begin to read each other’s minds. My hon. Friend’s observation leads me seamlessly on to section 2 of my speech, which is entitled “Urgent care hub”.

In many ways, this is the most exciting challenge that the hospital faces. The idea of an urgent care hub is to have on one site, at Kettering general hospital, a one-stop shop for GP services and out-of-hours care, an on-site pharmacy, a minor injuries unit, facilities for social services and mental health care, access to community care services for the frail elderly and a replacement for the hospital’s A&E department, which, as I have said, is more than 20 years old.

The three local MPs are working hard on this issue but, frankly, we need more support from the Minister. The hospital has drawn up ambitious proposals to develop the urgent care hub, which could cost between £20 million and £30 million. It is exactly the sort of thing that NHS England has highlighted in its “Five Year Forward View” as the way forward, and it enjoyed the support of the previous Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter). In a debate in Westminster Hall on 24 March 2015, he said:

“...the principle of the hub is absolutely the right way forward for the local NHS. It is the type of integrated care model that we need elsewhere in the country, particularly where the NHS is servicing a broad population. In this case, it is servicing not just Kettering, but a partially rural county and rural area. This is a model that I am sure hon. Members will continue to support and that I will continue to have a keen interest in supporting. I hope the plans will be successful at making the improvements that patients in my hon. Friend’s constituency and the area surrounding Kettering want. There are encouraging signs. The improvements envisaged are significant and would ensure that the local area had a resilient and high-quality health care system to deliver the highest-quality patient care.”—[Official Report, 24 March 2015, Vol. 594, c. 440WH.]

Would the Minister be kind enough to visit Kettering general hospital to look at the proposals for an urgent care hub? I am going to be pestering him at every Health questions this Parliament, and it would greatly assist the quality of his answers if he is able to visit the hospital and then speak from a position of knowledge. Kettering general hospital could lead a pioneering development for our country’s NHS. That brings me to the wider issue of funding for the estate at Kettering general hospital. A small or medium district general hospital such as Kettering, which is on an ageing town-centre site, will inevitably have a great backlog of maintenance and equipment that needs to be replaced every year. The hospital spends something like £10 million to £15 million of capital each year through loans, unhelpfully swelling the balance sheet. The financial pressure on the hospital is clearly huge. The capital programme for next year is largely made up of three items: £5 million on a maintenance backlog; just over £1 million on IT infrastructure; and almost £1.5 million on medical equipment. The Minister needs to make the point to the Chancellor that there is currently no capital support for the strategic transformation plans.

Transforming district general hospitals up and down the country will be difficult. Nevertheless, Kettering general hospital is innovating. It has installed a new modular unit to try to upgrade the A&E, with 13 major bays for complex medical and surgical needs. I remind the Minister that Kettering’s A&E now treats 83,000 patients. It was designed to treat 40,000 and was built 20 years ago. Some £5 million has been spent on a new maternity unit, bringing state-of-the-art maternity services to the hospital, where 3,800 babies are delivered and 2,000 gynaecological and obstetric procedures are carried out every year. Those developments are fantastic, but they are expensive and difficult for the Kettering General Hospital NHS Trust to afford.

My fourth point of five is about the national IT roll-out. Hospitals experience difficulties in complying with necessary advances in linking their IT systems to regional and national services. One example is the problem that local patients have experienced in getting their X-ray results. There is meant to be an integrated east midlands system for X-rays, but Kettering has experienced difficulties, and some delays in getting X-rays to patients have lasted three or four months, which the hospital admits is unacceptable. The Minister needs to be made aware of the IT challenge faced by district general hospitals.

On the workforce, Kettering is succeeding in recruiting staff, which is good news, but there are still vacancies. Of 1,200 nursing posts, 80 remain vacant as of today. Many of the nurses come from Europe and elsewhere. The hospital has recruited 72 European nurses and the good news is that 95% of them have stayed with the trust—the national average retention rate is 28%. On the Minister’s visit to the hospital, he will be able to learn from a good example of how to retain hard-working
staff, and he may be able to apply that elsewhere. In Kettering, 61% of people voted to leave the European Union, a fact of which I am hugely proud, but when we negotiate our Brexit terms and conditions, we must make provision to retain key personnel from the EU who bring to our country the skills we need and are unable to find among our own people.

Kettering general is a very good hospital, but it is under a huge amount of pressure. There are things that the Government can do to make it succeed. Along with my hon. Friends the Members for Wellingborough (Mr Bone) and for Corby (Tom Pursglove), I will be on the Minister’s case for the rest of this Parliament to make sure that our hospital works properly and successfully, delivering the local patient care that people need and deserve.

2.45 pm

Mr Peter Bone (Wellingborough) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend for his intervention. He is so active in Corby that it is no wonder that he has got his minor accident and emergency centre ahead of me, but we cannot have a hub-and-spoke system if one of the spokes is not there. It would not be a bad idea for the Minister to come and see physically why this unit is such a good idea.

2.47 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): What a pleasure it is to join you this afternoon to participate in this debate on Kettering hospital, Madam Deputy Speaker. I congratulate my hon. Friend for Kettering (Mr Hollobone), not just on securing this debate, but on his persistence in keeping Kettering hospital at the forefront of the national debate on what is happening to our health service. He has taken an assiduous interest in promoting it at almost every opportunity, as he suggested today. Indeed, he raised the matter at my first Health questions earlier this month and was on his feet raising it again with the Prime Minister the following day. He is a worthy champion of the cause, and I am therefore fully aware of his interest in local health matters affecting his constituents.

I wish to join my hon. Friend in recognising at the outset the great work done by all our staff in the NHS right across the country, but particularly the staff who work in and around Kettering and the other hospitals we have heard of today from my hon. Friends the Members for Corby (Tom Pursglove) and for Wellingborough (Mr Bone). I was invited by two of the three Members who have spoken to attend their local hospitals—

Tom Pursglove: You are very welcome to Corby, too.

Mr Dunne: My hon. Friend, from a sedentary position, extends an invitation, too. I am grateful to all three hon. Friends. I am relatively newly in post, and the demands at present are to visit hospitals that are in greater difficulty than any of these cases, but I will endeavour to see what I can do during next year possibly to visit Kettering.

Mr Hollobone: One visit to all three of us would kill three birds with one stone.

Mr Dunne: I have responsibility for the acute sector, not the community sector, so initially my visit would be focused on Kettering hospital. I will certainly do what I can, but I think that it will have to be some time next year. My hon. Friend has previously met my predecessors to discuss health services in his constituency. He has raised a number of issues today, and I will attempt to address most, if not all, of them in the time that I have.

I wish to start with my hon. Friend’s concerns about the underfunding of his local clinical commissioning groups. That was a point also raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Wellingborough. NHS England is working to move CCGs towards their target fair share of funding, but this has to take place at a pace that maintains stability in the system across the country at a time of significant financial challenge. I feel that quite acutely as a local Member of Parliament representing a rural constituency that has been consistently underfunded.

We are taking steps, as I mentioned to the House in a debate earlier this week, to look at introducing a fairer share of funding for rural areas and addressing other issues such as social deprivation. A consequence of that has been to try to bring those CCG areas that are recognised to be underfunded closer to the target.

The point was made that Nene and Corby CCGs have been beyond 5% of the target. I am pleased to confirm the figures that were mentioned earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Kettering: Nene and Corby CCGs received cash increases of 5.2% and 9.4% respectively in the current year. Those increases are significantly above the average for English CCGs and bring them both within 5% of their target allocation in this year. I think that 9.4% is one of the highest increases in allocation
that we have seen this year across the country, so I hope that he recognises that we are moving to right that historic challenge. This year, more than £757 million will go into my hon. Friend’s local area, and allocations over the next few years should bring both Nene and Corby CCGs even closer to their funding target.

I will take a moment to touch on the national pressures that are affecting the NHS. The NHS is very busy, but hospitals are generally performing well. The latest figures for August 2016 show that more than nine out of 10 people were seen in A&E within four hours. During 2015-16, nearly 2,500 more people were seen in A&E each day within four hours compared with 2009-10.

Paramedics respond to the majority of life-threatening cases in under eight minutes. More than 567,000 emergency calls received a face-to-face response from the ambulance services across England in August 2016 alone—an average of 18,300 a day. Ambulance services are busy, which is why we are increasing paramedic training places by more than 60% in this year alone, on top of the 2,300 extra paramedics who have joined the NHS since 2010. That allows more than 200 additional ambulances to be deployed by the NHS compared with 2010.

Mr Bone: The Minister is making a very good point. Does he not accept that if an ambulance were to take a patient to the Isebrook hospital, it is 10 minutes’ transport, but if it has to go to Kettering, it is 45 minutes’ transport? Is that not the sort of thing that we should look at as an efficiency saving, which is worth the investment in Isebrook?

Mr Dunne: I would agree with my hon. Friend in the event that the hospital in Wellingborough were able to cope with the condition, but many of the most serious conditions need to go to the best place to deliver the service, even if it takes a bit longer to get there. The quality of treatment in our ambulances now, with the skills of the paramedics who are on board and the quality of treatment in our ambulances now, with the skills of the paramedics who are on board in almost all cases, is such that very few people die while in transit. They are kept stable, and they need to go to the best place for treatment.

Going back to the national picture, the NHS last year treated, on average, 21,000 more outpatients a day and performed more than 4,400 operations a day compared with 2010. There is substantially more activity across the NHS, which is one reason why we have recruited so many more clinicians to help cope with this activity. We now have over 8,500 more doctors and over 2,700 more nurses, paid for in part by having nearly 7,000 fewer managers. Ultimately, we want to reduce pressure on services by reforming the urgent care system and caring for people better in the community, and that is where I think some of the things being done and being planned for the Kettering area are so interesting. It is clear that the NHS in the constituency understands the scale of the challenge and is taking action to address it.

Mr Hollobone: We understand the scale of the challenge. The problem is that the urgent care hub proposals, which are really exciting and could be rolled out across the country, are now with NHS Improvement, and its say-so is required to go to the consultancy phase.

Mr Dunne: Indeed, and our plans for improvement and integration among collaborative NHS areas across the country, including the Kettering area, through the sustainability and transformation plans are being delivered for each area today. NHS England will review those plans and decide to prioritise those that meet the national objectives and are best thought out.

In the past three years, including the current year, the Department has provided just over £37 million of interim revenue support and over £15 million of emergency capital to the trust. Since May 2010, capital expenditure on the hospital has amounted to £68.7 million, so it is receiving quite substantial support from the Department. The intention of the transformation work is to move to a position where the ability to cope with the remaining additional pressures on A&E and across the patient flow in the hospital is built in.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kettering said that the trust’s emergency department was too small and too limited in scope, and he touched on the new construction completed this year to extend the scope of the A&E department. It was originally built 20 years ago for 40,000 attendances a year, but is now dealing with more than 82,000. But the trust has had some success in reducing A&E attendances; there are more than 3,000 fewer than six years ago. The measures to integrate with the surrounding area are therefore having an effect on reducing attendances, despite the growing demand overall.

The trust has recruited and trained additional medical staff. Since 2010, the trust has increased its doctors by 77, or 24%, to 394. That is one of the most significant increases I have seen thus far. Some of this has come from the recruitment of staff through the certificate of eligibility for specialist registration scheme, involving doctors who have, for example, completed their specialist training overseas and chosen to practice in this country.

My hon. Friend and my hon. Friend the Member for Corby referred to proposals to develop the urgent care hub at the hospital. The aim is to develop a one-stop shop, which will enable patients to use primary care facilities, rather than A&E, by having these services co-located on the Kettering general hospital site. These services would enable rapid assessment, diagnosis and treatment by appropriate health and social care professionals. Patients would be streamed into appropriate treatment areas to minimise delays and reduce the need for admissions. This is an example of best practice across the NHS; it is what we are trying to introduce to relieve pressure on clinicians in the A&E department.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kettering raised the possibility of capital investment to develop this hub. The Department’s position has not changed. We are looking to the trust to take responsibility for developing and taking forward its own capital investment proposals. Foundation trusts, such as Kettering, can apply to the Department’s independent trust financing facility for a capital investment loan. They need to work closely with local planning authorities to ensure that developer infrastructure contributions can be taken into account as a source of funding.

I hope that these plans will be successful as they emerge through the STP, and as I have said, I hope that I will find an opportunity to visit Kettering on one of my visits north if I am allowed to do so on a suitable day when not required here in the Chamber.

Question put and agreed to.

3 pm

House adjourned.
Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move, That this House has considered forced organ removal in China.

This is a very difficult subject to talk about, but there are those of us who have followed this issue in China and listened to people who have come to the House to present petitions and speak to us about it. We have watched the film on the issue and had a briefing in the House as well. Many Members of the House have been vociferous and outspoken on the issue. I commend the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for the hard work that she has done on it in the House. We admire her courage, tenacity and commitment to the issue. The rest of us will add our contribution. I know that her contribution will be as important as everyone else’s. I thank every hon. Member who has come today to participate. The abstract nature of the debate may have precluded many from attending. I am grateful to those who are here for acknowledging that the issue is worthy of time and attention from Members of the House.

My boys like to watch crime dramas, as many of us do. Some of them are so far-fetched that I scoff along with them. However, others are too chillingly real. The idea of someone having organs cut out of them and waking up in a bath of ice has long been an urban legend. However, today’s debate is not based on a horror story as we approach Halloween; it is not make-believe. It is a horror that is all too real in China. As it has been brought to our attention, I feel that we have a role to play in returning this scenario to the realms of urban legend. That is why the debate is so important.

This story, which is almost too dreadful to believe, was first revealed in March 2006, when a woman stated that as many as 4,000 Falun Gong had been killed for their organs at the hospital in which she had worked. I had the privilege of meeting some of the families of those people in this House, and a charitable organisation was also involved, so we know some of the stories at first hand. That lady said that her husband, a surgeon at the same hospital outside the north-eastern city of Shenyang, had disclosed to her that he had removed corneas from the living bodies of 2,000 Falun Gong adherents. A week later, a Chinese military doctor not only corroborated the woman’s account but claimed that such atrocities were taking place in 36 different concentration camps throughout the country. He said that he had also witnessed Falun Gong being transported in massive numbers across the country in cattle trains, at night and under the cover of tight security. People may think that that is something from the history of the second world war, but the transportation of people in cattle trains is all too real. As I said, it happens at night and under the cover of tight security.

In 2006, two prominent Canadians—David Kilgour, a former MP, and David Matas, a human rights lawyer—published a report for the Coalition to Investigate the Persecution of Falun Gong in China, in which they gave credibility to claims that the Chinese authorities were harvesting organs from executed members of the group. Victims were held in concentration camps prior to dissection, after which the remains were immediately cremated, as if the authorities could get rid of the evidence of their ill deeds by cremating them so quickly.

It was in July 2006 that Kilgour and Matas published their 140-page report. It drew “the regrettable conclusion that these allegations are true.” The investigation uncovered the on-demand nature of organ transplants in China; there is an abundance of organs despite the lack of a functional donation system. Ten years later, on 22 June 2016, they published an update to their report. It shows the continued expansion of transplantation capacity—organ harvesting first came to light in 2006—the driving factors behind the industry’s growth, and the role of the ruling party, Government agencies and individual officials in implementing and perpetuating the systematic killing of prisoners of conscience for their organs. We are talking about those of the Falun Gong belief, those of Christian beliefs, who have been persecuted, people serving time in jail and those from other ethnic groups.

The harvesting is done on an industrial scale, as some of the figures illustrate very well. Although Chinese officials typically say that China transplants about 10,000 organs a year, the update to the report shows that figure is surpassed by just a few hospitals alone. We can say, based on Government-imposed minimum capacity requirements for transplant centres, that the total system-wide capacity since 2000 would have easily reached more than 1 million transplants. Given that the vast majority of those hospitals far exceed the minimum requirements, the number of transplants performed in China is staggering. As I said, it is on an industrial scale.

The Conservative Party Human Rights Commission heard from at least two witnesses on the harrowing practice of forced organ harvesting. Notably, it heard from Ethan Gutmann, who has spent several years investigating this appalling practice—the forced removal of internal organs from live individuals for transplant. It also notes the information provided on behalf of UK Falun Gong practitioners in the written submission. Ms Lin stated:

“There have been persistent allegations that large numbers of Falun Gong prisoners of conscience have been killed to supply China’s lucrative trade in vital organs. Uyghurs and other prisoners of conscience may have been victimised in a similar way.”

Former Falun Gong prisoners report being subjected to targeted medical examinations and blood tests in custody that appear designed to assess the health and compatibility for potential transplant of their organs, Ms Lin claimed. She told the commission:

“Concern stems in part from the significant discrepancy between the number of organ transplants performed and the known sources of organs: even when we include death row inmates, the number of transplants performed in China is far too high. The short wait times achieved by transplant hospitals suggest that people are killed on demand for their organs.”

That is the horror of what is taking place in China. The House must today illustrate the issues clearly and ensure that we speak on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves—those with no voice.

Ethan Gutmann has stated, based on meticulous research into individual hospital accommodations for transplant recipients, occupancy rates and a full accounting
of the overall number of hospitals in China carrying out organ transplants, that the claims by the Chinese of performing 10,000 organ transplants a year are intentionally low; they are keeping them low on purpose. The new report estimates that a minimum of 56,000 and perhaps as many as 110,000 organ transplants are being conducted a year, leading to an estimated overall total of 1.8 million organ transplants since 2001. Previous speculation that approximately 40,000 to 65,000 organs were extracted from prisoners of conscience is now seen as a serious underestimate, particularly as the number of Chinese hospitals that have informally confirmed the use of Falun Gong prisoners as a primary organ source continues to grow.

I am very concerned and I have tabled questions in the House, as other hon. Members have, on the issue. Organ tourism to China takes place. People in western countries find out about an organ that may be available in China at short notice. Given how quickly these things happen, there has to be an organised, established method of harvesting the organs so that those who come from the west can come across and get the transplant that they need so much. I urge the Government to take action on that issue as well. I know that that is not exactly in the portfolio of the Minister who is here to respond, but I am very pleased to see him. I know that all hon. Members will get a positive response from him.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman for putting the case and raising this important issue in so eloquent a manner. Does he agree that nations should not allow their citizens to travel to China for organs until we know that China meets the World Health Organisation guiding principles on transplantation and ethical standards?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and for wisely putting the thoughts of everyone in this Chamber today on record. I totally agree with her—I think we all do—and that is one of the things we hope the Minister will respond to, because those going to China cannot close their eyes or ears to what is happening and to the question of whom the organ is coming from. The recipient cannot say, “I don’t know, but I need the organ transplant.” I am not taking away from the fact that they need the organ transplant, but there must be rules in place and China must be part of that.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way, congratulate him on putting the case and apologising that I cannot stay for the whole thing. Many of the issues he has raised are of concern to lots of our constituents; a number have contacted me about the issue and I have also lodged questions on the back of contact from constituents. Does he share my disappointment at the Government’s slight lack of engagement on the issue? We understand they have to engage positively and sensitively with the Chinese Government, but an issue of concern to so many constituents ought to be taken seriously.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and for clearly stating what we feel. I am going to comment on questions other people have tabled and the response from Government until now. Perhaps, until now, we have seen inaction; today we are hoping for action that will clearly take this issue on, and we implore our Minister and the Department to respond positively.

In 2014 the Chinese medical establishment pledged that it would stop all organ harvesting from prisoners, yet the velocity of China’s organ harvesting industry does not suggest a retraction. Indeed it suggests the opposite; it suggests further acceleration of the practice. According to Ethan Gutmann, in a testimony to the US Congressional-Executive Commission on China on 18 September 2015—just over a year ago—the practice began in 1994 when “the first live organ harvests of death-row prisoners were performed on the execution grounds of Xinjiang.”

In 1997, Uyghur political prisoners were the target for organs to be forcefully donated to high-ranking Chinese Communist party officials. This disgusting and disgraceful forced organ transplantation goes to the very highest level of Chinese government and those involved need to be accountable for their actions. By 2001, Chinese military hospitals were “unambiguously targeting select Falun Gong prisoners for harvesting”, and by 2003 the first Tibetans were being targeted as well. There is systematic forced organ transplantation taking place of Falun Gong followers, of Christians and other ethnic groups and of those who are in prison, sometimes for minor charges. Then China goes to Tibet, where it has some control, and it targets people there as well; its horrific targeting for forced organ transplantation goes far beyond China.

Gutmann’s testimony continues: “By the end of 2005, China’s transplant apparatus had increased so dramatically that a tissue-matched organ”—the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) will be listening to this—“could be located within two weeks for any foreign organ tourist with cash.”

If a person has cash, they have got the organs. There is something morally wrong with that, there is something physically and emotionally wrong with that, and action has to be taken to stop it. At this stage I must admit I am not a conspiracy theorist. I am not someone who excels in piecing together facts to create theories, but I can clearly see that the figures do not add up. There is something horrifically wrong in the system and it needs to be addressed by the international community and our Government, who we look to for leadership at this time. Those two Canadians began the process. The US Congressional-Executive Commission on China conducted investigations, and now we are raising it in this place. We have a duty to do all that is in our power to apply diplomatically any pressure that we can to say the practice must stop. For moral decency and human rights, it cannot continue in any way, shape or form.

We have to put this into perspective and I understand the pain of those who wait for transplants every year. My own nephew, Peter, had a kidney transplant when he was just a teenager as he was so unwell. Only after he had been given the transplant did he progress and start to grow and live the life he could. I well remember the stress of the family as we waited for the call to hear that help was on the way for the child. I understand the pain
that so many people face waiting for an organ transplant. In Northern Ireland the transplant list is long as well; we had a waiting list last year of 177 people waiting for an organ transplant, and 135 transplants were available. We have a shortfall, so we need to address that issue. These are not just numbers; these are people waiting on life and death changes, which is why I urge people to ensure they carry a donor card—I have done so for many years and we have a very progressive donor donation and transplant system in Northern Ireland, which we believe we should take forward—and let their families know of their preferences should anything happen to them, so that they can save a life in their own death.

However, to take blood tests and to kill for the purpose of organ removal is murder and nothing less—it could be nothing else. Those carrying out that practice must be made to understand that it can never be acceptable, no matter what the circumstances may be. I have two granddaughters and should their lives depend on an organ transplant, I, or anyone in the close family, would very quickly give one of our organs to them for a transplant. I do not say that boastfully in any way; I say that honestly as a grandfather who loves his children and grandchildren. However, I could never take an organ from someone else by murder, and that is what is happening here. For the Chinese Government to claim that they only take from those convicts who give consent can be nothing other than an exaggeration of epic proportions, and it must be addressed by all political means possible.

It is no good burying our heads in the sand. We have the information, evidence and knowledge—we have two inquiries from Canada and the United States—and they all indicate that rightness dictates we do something with that information. My hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) raised the issue in 2013 with the then Minister, only to be told that this was being phased out by the Chinese Government. Well, it has not been phased out. Three years later it is still going strong and it is getting larger and stronger each time, so that is blatantly not the case. In July this year I asked what the plans were to discuss how to deal with the issue with the UN, I was told, just this year:

“The Government has no plans to make representations to the UN on organ harvesting in China. We pay close attention to the human rights situation in China, including allegations of organ harvesting and encourage China to implement its public commitment to stop the use of organs from prisoners.”

Words are not enough, Mr Gapes.

“Our current assessment of the human rights situation in China can be found in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy.”

We need to do more. We need to impulse our Government and the western world to take this matter on board and to act quickly.

Today, Minister, I am asking for more. I am asking that direct and effective steps are taken. Today, I am asking that meetings are arranged at international level to ensure that, rather than washing our hands of the matter, we do all we can to address it. Today, I am asking this House to stand and to say that the forced removal of organs from any person in any place in the world can never be acceptable, and that this Government will be known as one that speaks out for those with no voice—many of whom, in this case, are imprisoned owing to their religion. I speak out for religious freedom—it is something I am interested in and I am known for doing so. Again, I ask this House and this Government to take action and to do all in their power to see the end of this horror story practice taking place in our so-called modern age. The forced organ transplantation on an industrial scale is unabated and uncontrolled, and we in this House must take a stand today. I believe that we will and that this House is clearly united to make sure that it stops.

9.48 am

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this debate and on his powerful speech.

Let us be clear about what we are speaking of here, because if what we are discussing is indeed the case it virtually defies credibility. But increasingly research and evidence is pointing towards what is being alleged, which is that the Chinese Government actively condone—indeed, are involved in—the murder of potentially thousands of their own citizens every year for the purpose of forcibly extracting vital organs including livers, kidneys, hearts and corneas, sometimes while those people are still alive, and without anaesthetic. Many of those people are in prison, mainly—we are told—for their beliefs or ethnicity. Often their families are told that they have died. They are young people in reasonable health, and their families are simply handed an urn of ashes.

Credible research findings strongly suggest that many thousands of people are being killed for their organs, particularly people in minority groups, most notably practitioners of Falun Gong—a peaceful, meditative practice—although Tibetans, Uighurs and, potentially, house Christians have also been targeted for political reasons.

The allegations that Falun Gong practitioners, Tibetans and Uyghurs have been victims of that horrific practice are well documented and strong, as I shall recount. The suggestion that house church Christians may be affected requires further research. Either way, all the allegations of which we are now aware are sufficiently strong to require investigation by the international community.

It is of the highest necessity that the UK raises the issue with the Chinese directly, and calls for an international inquiry into the matter, ideally led by the United Nations. Even if the UN will not conduct a commission of inquiry, our Government should investigate the allegations and look at alternative mechanisms to bring to account those involved in those horrific alleged practices. If Britain as a nation is to maintain its status as a people concerned about grievous violations of human rights, it is imperative that the issue is addressed loudly and fearlessly, in co-operation with the other international organisations and leading parliamentarians across the world who are increasingly expressing concerns about the issue.

The Conservative party human rights commission, which I am privileged to chair, has recently conducted an inquiry into forced organ harvesting in China. During the course of the inquiry, I have been privileged to hear, in this House, first-hand testimony of those who have conducted research into the nature of the crime, and first-hand testimony by way of a powerful statement
from a former Chinese doctor, Dr Enver Tohti, who has been required to perform an organ operation on an executed prisoner—for transplant, he believes.

The House has been privileged to host the UK premiere of the film “The Bleeding Edge”, a fictional film based on the testimony of witnesses to illegal organ harvesting. It was harrowing. I am deeply grateful to Mr. Speaker for hosting the film, and to the actress, Anastasia Lin, who starred in the film and gave evidence at one of the hearings of the Conservative party human rights commission. I am aware of other films on the subject, notably “Human Harvest” and “Hard to Believe”.

As I speak, the Conservative party human rights commission is releasing a report of the inquiry, which can be found on the website www.conservativehumanrights.com. It contains more information than I can relay in this debate, but I will refer to some evidence received by the inquiry. The report was written by the vice-chair of the commission, Ben Rogers, who is an expert on human rights in China and elsewhere. I pay tribute to him for his dedicated work in this field and to the work of Christian Solidarity Worldwide, the organisation for which he works.

Written evidence submitted to the inquiry included a statement from a former prisoner, Yu Xinhui, who wrote:

“Everyone in the prison knows about this”—by which he means the removal of prisoners for organ harvesting.

“Usually in the prison, regardless of whether the person is deceased, if he is sent to the prison hospital, he faces the reality of having his organs removed at any moment. Everyone in prison knows that there exists a list of names. People...taken away, and no one will return.”

That list of names includes blood types and the health of patients’ organs so that the information is ready and available if a transplant request is made.

Yu Xinhui continued:

“I once asked a prison doctor, because this particular doctor was very sympathetic to us Falun Gong practitioners. He was especially sympathetic towards me, because we were from the same hometown. Once he told me secretly, saying, ‘Don’t go against the Communist Party. Don’t resist them. Whatever they tell you to do, just do it. Don’t go against them forcefully. If you do, then when the time comes, you won’t even know how you will die. When it happens, where your heart, liver, spleen, and lungs will be taken, you won’t even know either.’”

Yu Xinhui had three physical examinations while in prison, the last of which was in March 2005. Many former prisoners of conscience have testified to having been subjected to physical examinations while in prison that went beyond normal medical check-ups and were clearly aimed at assessing the health of their organs.

The timing of this debate is apt, given new evidence that the scale of organ harvesting in China may now be far higher than previously estimated. The evidence has built to a point where ignoring it is not an option. There is now strong, academically well-researched information that between 50,000 to 90,000 organ transplants may occur in China every year and are, effectively, concealed by the Government. That is in a country where there is no tradition of organ donation. Indeed, Chinese official figures put the number of voluntary donations at a total of 120 for the entire 30-year period between 1980 and 2009.

Let me quote further from the Conservative party human rights commission’s report:

“Although there are a variety of sources of evidence, there are three key reports which provide detailed research into the practice of forced organ harvesting in China”—the hon. Member for Strangford referred to those reports. Our report continues:

“The first, published on the Internet in 2006 and in print in 2009, was a report researched and written by the former Canadian Member of Parliament and former Government Minister David Kilgour and a respected human rights lawyer, David Matas, called Bloody Harvest: The Killing of Falun Gong for their organs. The second was Ethan Gutmann’s book The Slaughter: Mass Killings, Organ Harvesting, and China’s Secret Solution to its Dissident Problem, published in 2014.”

Both David Matas and Ethan Gutmann have given evidence to our commission. The third report, which was published this year, runs to 700 pages. It updates forensically those two pieces of research, is co-authored by David Kilgour, David Matas and Ethan Gutmann, and is entitled, “Bloody Harvest/The Slaughter: An Update.” I have heard Ethan Gutmann publicly invite from anyone, particularly from the Chinese, any evidence or comments that contradict the research in the report, but as of September 2016 none has been received.

The most important point made by the report, and indeed by David Matas and Ethan Gutmann in their evidence to the Conservative party human rights commission, is that the scale of forced organ harvesting in China is significantly underestimated. Their new research is forensic—they have inquired into the public records of no fewer than 712 hospitals in China that carry out liver and kidney transplants. Their detailed research leads them to conclude that potentially between 60,000 and 100,000 organs are transplanted each year in Chinese hospitals, which almost defies credibility. If those figures are correct, organs are being transplanted on an industrial scale, as the hon. Member for Strangford said. One hospital alone, the Orient organ transplant centre at the Tianjin first central hospital, is performing thousands of transplants a year according to its own bed occupancy data. Chinese officials claim that 10,000 organ transplants are carried out each year, but the authors of the report contend that that is easily surpassed by just a few hospitals.”

By way of background, according to Ethan the practice of forced organ harvesting began in China as long ago as 1994, when the first live organs were removed from death row prisoners on the execution grounds of Xinjiang. Dr Enver Tohti came to London to give evidence to us, and he told us about the process. He was a cancer surgeon in Ürümqi, Xinjiang province. In 1995, while he was simply doing his job, he was instructed by two of his hospital’s chief surgeons to prepare mobile surgery equipment—in other words, an ambulance—and to wait for them the next day at a hospital gate with the ambulance, the equipment and three other assistants. The following morning, at 9 am, the two chief surgeons arrived in a car and he was told to follow them. He did not know where he was going but, about half an hour later, they arrived at Western Mountain—Xishan—an
execution ground where prisoners were taken to be executed. He described what happened:

“We had been told to wait behind a hill, and come into the field as soon as we’d hear the gun shot. So we waited. A moment later there were gun shots. Not one, but many. We rushed into the field. An armed police officer approached us and told me where to go. He led us closer, then pointed to a corpse saying ‘this is the one’.”

A few prisoners had been executed. He continued:

“By then our chief surgeon appeared from nowhere and told me to remove the liver and two kidneys. He urged me to hurry up, so we took the body into the van and removed his liver and kidneys…our chief surgeons put those organs in a special box, and got into the car. They told me to take my team back to the hospital and left. I have no idea where they went… That was the end of that. Nobody has ever talked about what we did that day. It is something I wish hadn’t happened.”

Not only is the scale of the numbers a concern; the speed at which Chinese hospitals can obtain organs is also highly suspect. Doctors will tell us that the time they have to get an organ from a donor to a recipient varies but that it is very short for sensitive vital organs. A heart or a liver cannot simply be saved in a freezer until it is needed, which is why the NHS states that in this country the average wait for a suitable transplant for an adult is 145 days—of course, we are in a country with a tradition of donation. Compare that with the many statements in Chinese medical publications that they can find an emergency liver donor within 24 hours. I understand there is even a medical journal that boasts of taking only four hours to find a donor. I am informed that the Chinese Government claim that the organs come from death row prisoners who have been executed locally to the hospital that is providing the transplant, but the coincidence of that number of prisoners happening to have, say, a healthy liver, happening to match the blood type of the recipient and happening to have been executed locally is simply too much for credibility given the numbers involved. An alternative interpretation, and sadly the one that is more credible, is that people are being killed on demand to supply their organs.

In the other place, Lord Alton has been assured by the Government that the issue has been raised with the Chinese Government as part of the annual UK-China human rights dialogue and will be raised again, for which I thank the Government. However, evidence suggests that the Chinese Government have repeatedly committed themselves to denial, obfuscation and misdirection on this issue. It is therefore appropriate that we increase our activity in light of the new evidence I have highlighted. Indeed, there is growing international pressure on this matter.

The commission’s chairman said:

“That, of course, includes organ harvesting.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments and for setting the scene. Clearly the world is awakening to what is happening in China; she is as aware of that as I am. Will the awakening that we seem to see in Canada, in the States and now in the United Kingdom precipitate a need for our Government to contact the Chinese authorities to ensure that they can respond now to stop this practice? The weight of evidence is growing every day.

Fiona Bruce: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The growing international concern about organ harvesting means it is vital that this country joins in and does not lag behind the international community in condemning these practices and challenging the Chinese Government accordingly.

I have two more things to say. First, as well as politicians acting, the international medical community must do detailed analysis of the claims made by these respected researchers. It is helpful to note that the president of the Transplantation Society, Dr Philip O’Connell, said at the society’s international conference in Hong Kong this year, addressing his comments to China, that

“All remains, in many sectors, a deep sense of mistrust of your transplant programs…It is important that you understand that the global community”

I believe he was referring to the global medical community—“is appalled by the practices”. 

Owing to the severity of underlying abuse there is a clear need to organise without delay an independent investigation into ongoing organ harvesting in the People’s Republic of China.”

Similarly, the United States Congress unanimously passed a resolution in June 2016 condemning the practice of state-sanctioned forced organ harvesting in the People’s Republic of China. The resolution calls for visas to be denied to those involved in coerced organ or tissue transplantation. It expresses

“concern regarding persistent and credible reports of systematic, state-sanctioned organ harvesting from non-consenting prisoners of conscience in the People’s Republic of China, including from large numbers of Falun Gong practitioners and members of other religious and ethnic minority groups.”

The concerns in America are coming from leading Congressmen and Senators. I was privileged to meet Congressman Chris Smith in Washington DC last week. He is the fourth longest-serving member of Congress and is a remarkable campaigner for human rights across the world. He spoke at a joint sub-committee of the US committee on foreign affairs on 21 June. I will quote him at more length at the end of my speech if I have time, but he told the House of Representatives:

“Twenty years ago, I chaired a human rights hearing in my subcommittee with a Chinese security official who testified that he and his other security agents were executing prisoners—with doctors...there and ambulances—in order to steal their organs for transplant. Since then, this horrific practice has skyrocketed.”

The US Congressional-Executive Commission on China published its annual report less than two weeks ago; I was privileged to meet the group of young people who work for the commission and who produced the report. The commission’s chairman said:

“The Chinese government’s human rights record is utterly deplorable, continuing a downward trend over the past three years.”

That, of course, includes organ harvesting.
Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): My hon. Friend makes several important points. Does she agree that it would be helpful if the Minister confirmed, first, whether there is a date for the next annual human rights dialogue; and, if so when it is; secondly, when the next UK Government report on human rights to the UN in Geneva is due; and thirdly whether there has been any response to the request by the Foreign Office Minister in the Lords for more information from the Chinese authorities about their response to the various accusations?

Fiona Bruce: I am grateful for that intervention, particularly as it comes from the chair of the all-party group on China, whose views are very much respected in this House. His questions to the Minister today are very well placed.

Yesterday evening I tabled early-day motion 502, “Forced organ harvesting in China”. I ask colleagues to be good enough to sign and support the motion. I shall read it out in full for the record, because it contains my request to the Minister today:

“That this House notes with grave concern allegations of forced organ harvesting in China; further notes that victims said to be targeted for forced organ extraction are prisoners of conscience; acknowledges evidence detailed in Bloody Harvest/The Slaughter: An Update, by former Canadian Member of Parliament David Kilgour, lawyer David Matas and researcher Ethan Gutmann, along with other reports; notes the recent United States House of Representatives resolution 343 on forced organ harvesting in China and European Parliament written declaration 2016/WD48; calls on China to immediately end any forced organ harvesting; urges the Government to condemn forced organ harvesting and to seek a UN Commission of Inquiry to investigate this practice, or conduct an inquiry through other international mechanisms, to ensure accountability and to assess whether this practice could amount to a crime against humanity; further urges the Government to release statistics on the numbers of UK citizens travelling to China for organ transplants and prohibit British citizens from travelling to China for the purpose of receiving organ transplants; urges the Government to introduce a travel ban prohibiting medical personnel and officials who may be engaged in forced organ harvesting from travelling to the UK; and calls on the Government to give urgent consideration to other measures it could take to hold China to account for this practice and demand an end to it.”

I will finish by quoting the senior US Congressman Chris Smith:

“What adjectives do we use to describe what Chinese doctors and hospitals have been doing these past decades? Ordinary words like concerned, disturbed or shocking just seem inadequate. We tend to reserve words like ‘barbaric’ for truly horrible crimes— and... we must call organ harvesting...barbaric.”

10.16 am

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. It is a privilege to be able to speak in this serious and important debate. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford, the Foreign Office acknowledged that, although few British people are thought to travel overseas for such transplants, “it is very difficult to prevent UK citizens travelling to less well-regulated countries” to do so. When the Minister responds to the debate, perhaps he would care to elaborate on that, as well as on the various difficulties faced. What assessment has been made of any potential methods to restrict travel of that kind? I am sure he will also explain the diplomatic efforts to end the practice of forced organ removal in China. I would like to hear today an undertaking that such efforts will be stepped up. There are signs that the matter has fallen off the radar at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I am pleased that this debate is taking place. It is not only interesting but informative. I pay tribute not only to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), but to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for her fantastic report, which I have read.

Does the hon. Lady agree that the UK Government’s policy of speaking to the Chinese behind closed doors—or behind their hands, so to speak—has not worked? We now need to speak publicly about the human rights abuses that are occurring in China to make them seek to change how they treat their citizens.

Margaret Ferrier: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. It is interesting that we hear about conversations going on behind closed doors not only with China but with other countries, because of certain
difficulties. We have to be careful how we deal with countries such as China. We do a lot of trade with China and with some countries in the middle east that unfortunately have poor human rights records. If talking behind closed doors is not working, it is time to bring things into the public domain. I hope the Minister will take that on board.

Although the FCO’s 2014 corporate report into human rights in China noted that the country “announced in December that it would cease harvesting organs from executed prisoners by 1 January 2015”, there is simply no mention whatever of the practice in the 2016 report. Will the Minister commit to taking action to demonstrate the Government’s ongoing commitment to tackling organ harvesting? Will he give an undertaking that the UK will make representations to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on efforts to investigate forced organ removal in China?

As we have heard, thousands of religious prisoners in China have had their livers, kidneys and corneas ripped out while they were still alive. It is absolutely horrific to think of that. Will the UK use its position to push at EU level for high-level European action to address the practice? Forced organ donation is abhorrent. It is a practice that makes a mockery of even the most fundamental and basic universal human rights. As journalist Ethan Gutmann stated:

“We acknowledge a terrible atrocity only after it’s over.”

We have to change that and always speak out against what we know in our hearts is fundamentally wrong.

In closing, I shall quote Dr Martin Luther King, who said:

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

Dr King’s words ring as true today as when first spoken. If human rights are truly universal, we must uphold them everywhere, and challenge violations wherever they occur.

10.23 am

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing such an interesting and informative debate. We may not have heard from many speakers, but the quality of information that has been imparted has been superb. The hon. Gentleman said two things that I will repeat, because they sum up the entirety of the debate for me. He said that what is happening in China is “almost too dreadful to believe”, and he underlined the stark reality that the message that has to go out is that people are being killed on demand for their organs.

I must admit that, prior to the conference recess, I was one of those people who saw this issue as almost an urban myth. My research for this debate made me incredibly uncomfortable, but it brought home clearly the horror of forced organ removal. I found a number of well researched documentaries and reports, which only magnified the horror by showing the enormity of the scale of the practice. Unlike the hon. Member for Strangford, I am not going to use the term “industrial”, because I think it dehumanises the experience, but it is hard to come up with an expression that quantifies the sheer scale of this practice.

The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) made one of the most informed speeches I have heard on this subject, after all the research I have done. She summarised wonderfully some horrific cases that really bring the message home. I commend her for the work she has done on the issue and for highlighting it clearly and succinctly. I spent hours over the conference recess watching documentaries and trying to read the 2016 report by David Matas and David Kilgour, and the best way I can describe it is “spine-chilling”. I started by watching their documentary; I probably should not have done so, because every time I read the documents it brought back some of the images I saw. We are discussing definitely some of world’s worst crimes against humanity.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) highlighted her own condemnation of the practice and that of our Scottish National party colleagues. I reiterate that point: we totally condemn the practice of forced organ donation—although “donation” is probably not the best term to use. My hon. Friend also highlighted the good cross-party work done by our colleague in the Scottish Parliament, Bob Doris. I am pleased to say that the Scottish Parliament made organ trafficking illegal in Scotland through the Human Tissue (Scotland) Act 2006. That legislation is based on the principle of people freely indicating their wish to donate organs after their death. It prohibits the trafficking of organs and provides for severe penalties for anyone found guilty of doing so. That is an example of good practice from the Scottish Parliament.

The SNP calls on the UK Government to step up their diplomatic efforts to end this practice in China. Forced organ donation, or removal, is absolutely abhorrent, and it flies in the face of basic human rights. I know that successive UK Governments have expressed concerns about claims of organ harvesting, often in the context of the ongoing UK-China human rights dialogue and the UK-China strategic dialogue. The issue is not mentioned in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s latest human rights update on China, published in July, which is part of its annual human rights and democracy report. However, it was mentioned in the 2014 report, which, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West said, stated:

“In a positive development, China announced in December that it would cease harvesting organs from executed prisoners by 1 January 2015.”

The updated report from earlier this year proves that, woefully, that is not the case. With 60,000 to 100,000 organs being forcibly transplanted each year, we need to take drastic action.

We call on the UK Government to step up their diplomatic efforts to end this practice in China. The UK should make representations to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on efforts to investigate forced organ removal and use its position in the EU to push for high-level European action to address the practice. Let me be clear: I am not suggesting that we should isolate China, but we should engage in a constructive dialogue and deepen relationships in order to get a result.

10.28 am

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim
Catherine West: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I think it was the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) who suggested that this issue is just so horrific to think about. We are talking about it in the cold light of day now, but I think that people will need quite a strong constitution to watch the film.

The hon. Member for Congleton talked about Dr Enver Tohti’s time working as a surgeon in China. I will be interested to follow up on his personal testimonies about the executions and subsequent organ harvesting. I am sure that the Foreign Office is looking carefully at those reports in order to come to a judgment on how to substantiate those claims and on what action to take as a result. Any suggestion of “on-demand killing” for organs is too terrible even to contemplate.

I press the Minister on the issue of a travel ban. Does he believe that that strategy could work? Furthermore, the hon. Member for Congleton talked, in the light of the allegations, about the increased activity in recent years. I note that in the briefing prepared for today’s debate there is quite a lot of fresh information from 2015 and 2016. We do not feel reassured that this activity is being reduced. We need to ask further questions.

I will briefly put on record my appreciation of the comments by the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) and of his forensic questioning about exactly where we are in relation to the human rights dialogue. He is right to remind the House that we already have a vehicle in place to examine human rights in all countries about which we have concerns, particularly in relation to the groups that are highlighted in the reports.

In the context of the alleged organ harvesting, the Uyghurs, the Tibetans, the House Christians and Falun Gong tend to be the groups that come up again and again in the human rights legislation, in the recordings and in other evidence. Therefore, could the Minister respond to the questions put by the hon. Member for Gloucester—what is the existing framework and what are the dates for ongoing dialogue and challenge? Also, can he explain why there is no mention of this issue, which is clearly of concern to so many people, in the July 2016 FCO report?

I thank all Members for being here today and for putting on the record their concerns and questions. May I press the Minister on the question of an independent investigation by the British Government and of the Government working closely with the UN on the issue? What are the levers we can use around some of our concerns and ongoing positive elements of our relationship.

Catherine West: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I think it was the hon. Member for Rutherglen and Hamilton West (Margaret Ferrier) who suggested that this issue is just so horrific to think about. We are talking about it in the cold light of day now, but I think that people will need quite a strong constitution to watch the film.

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Can the Minister clarify the question of allowing citizens to go to China for organs? How can we look at whether there are practical ways to establish a travel ban until we are absolutely sure that this is not happening? Also, can he explain how we can monitor any ongoing allegations, so that we can be absolutely sure that we are dealing with the facts?
10.36 am

**The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan):** Thank you, Mr Gapes, for calling me to speak; I am very pleased to respond to this important debate. Of course, normally it would be the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), who would reply, but he is in Indonesia. So I am very pleased to take his place, in order to respond to the concerns about this issue that have been so graphically expressed in this debate.

I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing the debate, and let us be very clear from the outset that any form of involuntary organ removal violates established medical and legal principles. However, the concerns that Members have expressed today relate to the most disturbing form of involuntary organ removal—"organ harvesting". Organ harvesting is the notion that members of minority groups and religious groups in China are held in detention, are unable to communicate with the outside world, and are killed specifically for their organs, virtually "to order". To hon. Members—and indeed the citizens of this country—the notion of organs being "harvested" and used for transplant, virtually "to order", is particularly abhorrent. There is also the separate ethical and moral question of involuntary organ removal from executed prisoners, with or without their alleged consent.

As we have heard, recent publications, including some that have been referred to in this debate today, have brought the issue of alleged "organ harvesting" into the spotlight. The authors of such reports believe that this practice is happening in China today and that the victims are mostly innocent people who just wish to practice their religion peacefully.

My officials consider the Kilgour, Gutmann and Matas report to be a very important source of information about China’s organ transplant system. It highlights how difficult it is to verify the number of organ transplants conducted in China each year, and states that it is almost impossible to identify the source of those organs.

The report rightly questions the lack of transparency in China’s organ transplant system. However, the authors of that report make it clear that they have no definitive evidence to justify their allegations. They are necessarily forced to rely on assumptions, and sometimes on research techniques that are less than rigorous. Although I do not doubt the need to maintain close scrutiny of organ transplant practices in China, we believe that the evidence base is not sufficiently strong to substantiate claims about the systematic harvesting of organs from minority groups. Indeed, based on all the evidence available to us, we cannot conclude that this practice of "organ harvesting" is definitely happening in China.

**Jim Shannon:** The information coming from the US congressional commission is that it has such evidence in its possession. Also, I understand that the Canadian Government have initiated some evidence taking, which shows that there is what they refer to as systematic forced organ transplantation. If that is the case, and the evidence exists—I believe that it clearly does—will the Minister look at that evidence, that information, and on the back of it take the action we all wish him to take?

**Sir Alan Duncan:** My understanding of the congressional report is that although it is broadly very critical of human rights in China, the report mentions organ harvesting only once. However, I will undertake to ask officials to write to the hon. Gentleman and expand further on the exact details of that point, in the hope that such comments will satisfy him about what I am saying.

**Fiona Bruce:** By necessity, there are no witnesses to the removal of the organs—the people involved are dead—but does the Minister not agree that, although we have talked about huge numbers, even one transgression of human rights caused by the involuntary removal of an organ is grossly wrong? Despite the fact that the authors of the report have challenged—indeed asked—the Chinese Government to reject their assertions, to come out and say that they are incorrect, there has been complete silence. There has been no rejection of the research or the information, or indeed of the authors’ conclusions.

**Sir Alan Duncan:** At the outset, I stated the principles by which we ought to look at the entire issue, and in that sense I totally agree with my hon. Friend. She is right to say that the difficulty of the issue is that, by its very nature, if it goes on it is hidden. Therefore, to establish the evidence is a very difficult exercise, but in respect of engagement with the Chinese Government I hope that in a moment I will be able to offer my hon. Friend a bit of reassurance about some progress we have been making.

The Government have serious concerns about restrictions on the freedom of religion or belief in China, including for Falun Gong practitioners. The freedom to practise, change or share one’s faith or belief without discrimination or violent opposition is a fundamental right that all people should enjoy; yet we have solid evidence, from multiple sources, of the persecution of religious minorities. Christians, Muslims and Buddhists, as well as Falun Gong practitioners, are persecuted through different means, with reports of their being detained incommunicado, being tortured and receiving inhuman treatment, and also being subjected to interference in their places of worship and in their religious teaching and customs. Everyone should be free to practise their religion according to their beliefs, in accordance with the international frameworks to which both the UK and China are party.

I assure the House that the Government pay close attention to the human rights situation in China. Indeed, no fewer than three British Ministers have raised individual cases with their Chinese counterparts in the past few months. As the former Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Mr Swire), stated to the House on 12 July, we have raised concerns about reports of organ harvesting, as well as of the torture and mistreatment of detainees, during our annual human rights dialogue with China, and I can let my hon. Friend the Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) know that the next such exchange will be on 27 and 28 October, here in London. At that exchange, we will raise our human rights concerns, including the treatment of Falun Gong practitioners and the lack of transparency in China’s organ transplant system. So the debate is timely, and I will ensure that hon. Members’ concerns are raised at that dialogue.
The use of the death penalty in China is also a subject of great concern, with the number of prisoners being executed a closely guarded secret and, therefore, difficult to estimate. We oppose the death penalty in all circumstances and campaign actively worldwide for its abolition. In the past, organs were taken from executed prisoners without prior consent. China committed to end the practice of involuntary organ removal from January 2015. Although that was an important and positive step, the degree to which it has been implemented is not clear. There are also complex ethical questions about the ability of condemned prisoners to give free and valid consent.

Following representations to the Chinese authorities, we received information on their organ donation policy yesterday. Although we have only just received the information—officials are scrutinising it—I would like to share it with the House. The information states that all organ donations in China are handled within a clear legal framework that meets international standards, including those of the World Health Organisation. There is a registration centre for managing information about the origins of organs used for donations, and statistics are shared with the WHO. The Chinese authorities provided statistics for 2015, which stated that 7,785 organs were donated from 2,766 donors. We intend to contact the WHO to try to validate that information. We have, however, received no detailed information about the treatment of prisoners’ organs. We therefore believe that, based on the evidence we have, it is likely that executed prisoners remain a key source of organs for transplant in China.

The hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), who is no longer in her seat, and the Opposition Front-Bench spokesperson, the hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West), raised the issue of people travelling to China for medical treatment, including what might be described as organ tourism. We do not collect data on that, but we believe that few people in the UK choose to travel to China for that purpose. The hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green asked if we would ban such travel, but the British Government cannot prevent individuals from travelling. We can, however, flag the risks and ensure that individuals are aware that other countries might have poorer medical and ethical safeguards than the UK does. Travelling abroad for any treatment, including organ transplant, carries risks. Medical staff have a responsibility to inform patients who are considering that route of the risks and of the fact that organs might not have been donated freely.

My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) mentioned the Conservative party human rights commission report. Although the Government were not asked to give evidence to the commission, and as such the report does not entirely reflect Government policy, there is much in it with which we agree. We are already pursuing an approach that is consistent with many of the report’s recommendations but parts of the report require further investigation to substantiate some of the claims made. Officials have offered to meet the authors, and as there is—I think—a plan to produce a separate report on organ harvesting, they have tried, but so far without success, to engage with the process of compiling that report.

Fiona Bruce: With respect, I believe that the Minister is referring to the wider report on human rights in China, which was produced by the commission some three months ago. Indeed, the commission said that it would produce a supplementary report on organ harvesting, and it is that report, published today, to which I referred and at which I hope officials will look. The commissioners, Members of Parliament and Members of the House of Lords would, I know, welcome the opportunity to meet Foreign Office officials to discuss both reports further.

Sir Alan Duncan: In the spirit in which my hon. Friend is entering into this, I can confirm that we would be pleased for her to come and speak to officials to discuss all the details and the evidence to see whether we can share information in order to understand exactly what the facts are, and therefore what the policy should be.

There was also a reference to a meeting of the UN Human Rights Council in September. We vigorously raise all human rights concerns on such occasions, although on this occasion not specifically organ harvesting.

Jim Shannon: I just want to recap on the organ tourism issue that the shadow Minister and the hon. Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood) talked about. Have the Government had an opportunity to raise the subject with other western countries? For instance, are the Government aware of what other countries do about it? Is there a chance we could work together to address the issues of organ tourism and those who go abroad specifically to get an organ? It is forced organ transplantation, so we have concerns. It would be better if the western countries could work together on that. Is there an opportunity to do that?

Sir Alan Duncan: It is probably true to say that there has not been much discussion with other countries on this particular issue. The hon. Gentleman, of course, has a point: when countries work together they can be more effective. Again, I will ask officials to write to him about such an initiative.

Fiona Bruce: May I intervene one final time?

Sir Alan Duncan: Of course.

Fiona Bruce: Will the officials ascertain which countries have already banned travel for organ tourism? I believe that Israel and possibly others have done so.

Sir Alan Duncan: It may not be practical to police it, but I can assure the House that the UK works with like-minded partners to strengthen the rules surrounding organ transplantation worldwide. This includes the development of the World Health Organisation guiding principles to ensure that organ removal for transplant takes place only according to agreed guidelines. We also support the declaration of Istanbul, which encourages all countries to draw up legal and professional frameworks to govern organ donation and transplantation activities. In the past eight years, more than 100 countries, including China, have endorsed the principles of the declaration and subsequently strengthened their laws against the commercial organ trade.
Contrary to some reports, our trading relationship with China does not prevent us from having frank discussions with the Chinese authorities on issues of concern such as this. We will continue to engage with them on the full range of issues, including organ transplants and the wider human rights agenda. We will continue to promote the universal values of freedom and respect for human rights and the importance of international co-operation.

10.53 am

Jim Shannon: I thank everyone who came along to support and participate in the debate and who made valuable contributions. I thank everyone who made speeches, particularly the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who has worked hard on this issue. I did not say this earlier, but I will say it now. Some children of those of the Falun Gong religious belief came to a presentation in the House, and Becky James took part in a Ride to Freedom event to highlight the issue. The children were able to portray clearly what the issues were. I urge the Government to work hard to internationalise the issue to bring us all together to ensure that we can effectively persuade China to stop forced organ transplantation. If we can do that, this House will be working in unison with those in the rest of the world who want to see this disgraceful and awful transplant of organs stopped.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered forced organ removal in China.

10.54 am

Sitting suspended.
arena by the club, the managing director, has stepped down. A petition started by the Coventry Telegraph calling for Sisu to sell up has amassed nearly 20,000 signatories. That petition has my support and that of my hon. Friends the Members for Coventry North East (Colleen Fletcher) and for Coventry North West. Just imagine if the club was succeeding and that number of fans attended home games.

I believe that every football club should work for the community that it represents, the community whose name it bears—in this case, Coventry City. That is the name on the shirt. The community is so tied to the club that the council recently renamed a road after the famous Jimmy Hill. A football club should not be viewed as a way to make a quick buck by faceless and unaccountable owners. The club, the community asset, has been mismanaged by a select few for their own benefit. Decisions have been made in the interests of the parent company, and the football club has been sidelined and relegated to second place behind the business interests of a hedge fund. The Football Association and the Football League must explain how such a company can pass the fit and proper person test and then proceed to run a club into the ground. It has no stadium, no manager and its academy is under threat. By every conceivable measure, the club is heading backwards. The existing regulations have clearly failed.

**Damian Collins** (Folkestone and Hythe) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on raising this issue, on which we strongly agree. He makes a really powerful point. One of the tragedies of Coventry City is that it demonstrates the weakness of the owners and directors test—the fit and proper person test—and the weakness of the FA or the league in making any sort of proper intervention in such a club. Does he agree that that shows the need for proper transparency of ownership and a greater number of independent directors on the boards of clubs, who could represent the city and the fans?

**Mr Cunningham:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his comments and pay tribute to him, because over the years he and I have done quite a bit of work in this area. I particularly thank him for the support he has given to the Coventry football supporters. The FA and the Football League have been highly critical of FIFA, but they should start by putting their own house in order—I fully agree with him about that. As I have the opportunity, I will mention that I hope he might also consider that the Select Committee on Culture, Media and Sport, on which he sits, might want to have a look at this issue.

**Damian Collins:** To give a plug, the Committee will be interviewing the chairman and the director of governance of the FA on Monday next week.

**Mr Cunningham:** I thank the hon. Gentleman. I am sure he will raise the issue of Coventry. There are potential solutions that would make the club work for the community again. Other clubs have shown us that giving fans an increased say can work. AFC Wimbledon is owned by the fans and the team was promoted last season, and Portsmouth is owned by its fans and is now turning a profit. I am not saying that is the only model to follow, but workable community solutions that put the fans first exist and should be considered. However, any solution is closed off unless Sisu decides to engage in a dialogue in good faith.

This morning I met representatives of the fans, who gave me a document that could form a basis for bringing both sides together to try and resolve the dispute—the Minister might want to look at it. They note in the document that the supporters expect a number of things from the owners of the club, which include a commitment to the football club, decent investment on and off the pitch, honest communication and engagement with the fans, fans being given a stake in the club, respect for the club’s traditions, a good relationship with the wider community and an offer of a quality matchday experience for all the fans. Those are reasonable requests and are in line with some of the points I have made this morning, but such solutions are closed off unless Sisu decides either to engage in a dialogue in good faith or to sell up, move on and leave its toxic legacy behind.

The future of the football club hangs in the balance. Having watched the club together on the terraces for decades, we now stand to see it fall away—to see it all lost—because of the poor choices of a hedge fund. It was all completely avoidable. At the end of the day, it is the fans and the community that lose out and suffer. Look at other clubs across the UK: when a club succeeds, the city and the area surrounding it succeed too. Football can provide a sense of identity, community and pride.

Will the Minister update me on any discussions that have taken place between her, Sisu and the FA? Will she intervene where appropriate? If she feels it is unacceptable for her to intervene herself, will she appoint somebody of repute to bring both sides together to try to resolve the dispute? Pressure must be put on Sisu to engage with other parties and the wider community, including the fans, with the Minister arbitrating if necessary. She should also consider appointing somebody of good repute—it could be a judge—to arbitrate.

**Kevin Foster** (Torbay) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. He knows of my personal involvement in this issue over the past few years. He will obviously agree that Sisu’s record and the position that the club finds itself in are absolutely lamentable. Does he agree that clubs need to be seen to be representatives of communities, not franchises that can be bought and moved about by owners? That is why it is key that we intervene strongly when a club finds itself in a lamentable position like that of Coventry City.

**Mr Cunningham:** I agree with the hon. Gentleman, who for years before coming to the House played a role in trying to bring both sides together. I think the Minister can play a significant part if she is the will is there. I do not want to criticise the current Minister, because she is fairly new in her job, but previous Ministers have done the “Grand Old Duke of York” routine: we had meetings with them and got to the top of the hill, but we all ended up back down it again—in fact, we rolled back down.

I ask that the Football League reviews the appropriateness of its fit and proper test. As a minimum, the Culture, Media and Sport Committee should look at the regulations...
that are in place—I have already said that to its Chairman—so this can never happen again. Lastly, I ask that Sisu ends its involvement with Coventry City football club so the damage it has caused can begin to be undone, unless it is prepared to talk reasonably with the fans and use the charter as a basis for an agreement to resolve the dispute.

11.12 am

Colleen Fletcher (Coventry North East) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) on securing this debate. He has been involved in this issue for many years, as was my constituency predecessor.

In the short time available to me, I want to make two points and echo all that my hon. Friend said. First, the Football League allowed Sisu—the owners of the Sky Blues—to move the club away from Coventry in 2013 temporarily, having been assured by Sisu that it would build a new stadium in the city. Since then, there have been numerous stories about its plans for a long-term stadium solution in or around the city of Coventry, the latest of which—apparently its preferred option—is a new stadium and ground-share agreement at the Butts stadium. However, nobody who knows the local area and understands the issues involved has ever believed that any of Sisu’s plans are feasible or anything other than a smokescreen. There has never been any evidence of serious intent to build a new stadium. In reality, the only viable option to secure the club’s long-term future in Coventry is an extension of the agreement to play home games at the Ricoh arena, which is due to expire in 2018. The club’s owners know that, whether they admit it or not. They must now do everything within their power to ensure that the agreement is extended. If they are incapable of achieving that, they should sell up and go, as the Coventry Telegraph has called on them to do.

Secondly, the Football League claims to be a genuine regulatory body, not just a representative organisation acting in the interest of club owners and its own narrow self-interest. If the Football League is indeed the effective and responsible regulatory body it claims to be, it will surely have sought and received clear evidence from Sisu to show that it has a plan to secure a long-term stadium solution in Coventry. Similarly, it will have monitored the situation to ensure that real progress is made to achieve that ambition, and it will wish to take appropriate and robust action, including the removal of the golden share from Sisu, should the situation remain unresolved. I urge the Minister to ask the Football League for sight of that evidence. I intend to do the same during a meeting I have with it later this week, but I fear that it does not hold such evidence because it simply does not exist. If I am right, that demonstrates the inadequacy of its role in the Coventry City saga and its inability—or, worse, its unwillingness—to properly regulate the game of football. For the sake of the thousands of loyal Coventry City fans, we need to find a resolution to this situation, which has gone on for far too long.

11.15 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I am extremely grateful to the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham) for securing this debate. We have been friends across the Chamber for many years, and he is extremely passionate about this issue. There has not been a moment in our friendship when Coventry City has not come up as a topic of conversation. With his knowledge and passion, he made some incredibly insightful contributions, as did other hon. Members.

As the hon. Gentleman said, football clubs up and down the country remain a matter of great importance. They are valuable parts of our local communities, and every care should be taken by their owners and stakeholders to protect their long-term future. The preservation of Coventry City football club in particular is not a new issue. As the hon. Gentleman said, my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Mrs Grant), debated the subject in the House in September 2014 and October 2013. I am sure I was not alone in welcoming the club’s return to the Ricoh arena in late 2014, so it is with regret that two years on we are once again talking about our concerns about the club’s ownership and the uncertainty surrounding where the team will be playing its football in the foreseeable future.

There is a great deal of focus on the amount of money at the top end of professional football, but we must remember that the majority of clubs compete in the lower divisions and operate on a considerably different scale. Such clubs cannot rely on huge sums of money from broadcasters or sponsors. They need the continuous support of local businesses, local councils and, of course, the club’s supporters. That applies to Coventry City. I am aware of its illustrious past—as the hon. Gentleman knows, the first time I ever cried at a football match was when Coventry beat Tottenham at Wembley in 1987. Despite that, I have great sympathy with the fans of Coventry City, as I have with the supporters of any club that is suffering as a consequence of either poor performance on the pitch or financial struggles off the pitch.

The financial state of clubs in this country is better now than at any time over the past 20 years. The football authorities have made progress over recent years to introduce new ownership and financial rules, including a means and abilities test, which requires proof of funds from prospective new owners, transfer embargoes to help to curb club spending and the financial fair play principles across the 92 professional clubs. Financial fair play, in particular, has led to more responsible spending by clubs and, as a result, fewer incidents of club insolvencies. I think I am right in saying that Coventry City’s owners have in recent years reduced the debt the club once carried, and the return to the Ricoh arena has improved the club’s financial position. However, I hear what both the hon. Member for Coventry South and my hon. Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Damian Collins) said, and I can reassure them that the test will always remain under review.

Ensuring the long-term financial sustainability of clubs must be the primary responsibility of the football authorities and of all owners. That said, I also believe that supporters have every right to protest against the way they see their club being run if they believe that the plans or methods the owners are deploying are not working, so long as those protests are carried out in a non-threatening manner. It is clear from the ongoing protests at Coventry City that genuine concerns remain
about the owners’ ability to take the club forward and to resolve the matter of where the first team and its academy will train and play. Those would be real concerns for any club. Although I am not privy to the owners’ thought process or the discussions that have taken place among the relevant parties about residency, it is clear that there remains a distinct lack of clarity on all those fronts. I call on all those interested parties to come forward and to provide the clarity that is needed, for the good of the club and its loyal supporters.

**Damian Collins:** The Minister said that the owners and directors test is kept under review. Does she share my concern that, as it is defined at the moment, it is a fairly narrow test of whether someone has unspent convictions that make them incapable of being a director? It gives little discretionary power to the league or the FA to come to an opinion, based on a range of factors that are part of the experience of that director, about whether that director is fit to hold that role.

**Tracey Crouch:** We always keep all such things under review, and I am looking forward to seeing the outcome of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee’s meeting next week with the FA. It is important that we have healthy football clubs and owners who care for and respect those football clubs and the communities in which they sit. There is a gamut of reasons for that, including more than just financial conduct and criminal activity. It is important that we keep such things under review, but I am looking forward to seeing the outcome of the Select Committee’s meeting next week with the FA.

I return to the need to ensure that all interested parties come forward and provide clarity. It is important that the club’s owners and Coventry City Council sit down and try to resolve the ongoing row between them, which began with rent disputes and resulted in the football team temporarily relocating to Northampton, and continues to cast a shadow over the new and progressive measures that are needed to take the club forward. I am aware of the ongoing legal dispute and I do not want to prejudice it or take sides. It is for the two parties and Wasps Rugby to decide how best to resolve that dispute and set about finding ways to work together, for the sake of the local community.

The club’s owners or senior executives should make arrangements to meet a representative group of Coventry supporters as soon as possible. There needs to be much greater open dialogue on the matters of strategic importance to the club, including what plans there are for its future home.

**Mr Jim Cunningham:** I come back to something that I said in my speech: we need someone eminent to get both sides together. We can call for people to do that, but we have to get someone of eminence who can actually bring both sides together. That is key if the Minister herself cannot do that.

**Tracey Crouch:** I am flattered that the hon. Gentleman thinks that I am that eminent person.

**Mr Jim Cunningham:** I didn’t say you were.
or whatever—come back to the Minister’s door time after time is that the football authorities are powerless to do anything when they see a club being run badly? As long as owners are keeping within the narrow confines of the rules, they can run a football club into the ground and the FA will not lift a finger.

Tracey Crouch: My hon. Friend makes an important point, which I will discuss with officials later today. There is perhaps a gap there, and that is perhaps something that we need to look at. I am sure that that issue will be raised by him or other members of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee at its meeting next week with the FA.

I will turn briefly to the comments made by the hon. Member for Coventry North East on the Football Association. Following all the discussions and the temporary relocation, the league confirmed:

“Any application to move…to a stadium outside the city would need to be considered by”

the league’s board.

“In doing so, the Board would require the club to demonstrate that it had a clear plan for returning to Coventry within a prescribed timeframe.”

I sincerely hope that history does not repeat itself and that the club does not find itself playing outside its city again. However, it is important that supporters know exactly what the rules are, so after this debate I will ask the league to confirm its position. Furthermore, there should be a proposal forthcoming for the league or the FA to ensure that fans are properly consulted.

To conclude, it is right that the Government do not involve themselves in the regulation of football or the business and commercial affairs of any club. Football clubs must be run as businesses, but they also need social consciences; they must consider the impacts of their actions on supporters and the local community. It is important that those who have a direct say or influence over the future of Coventry City stand up and provide the clarity that is needed. It is of paramount importance that the city of Coventry has a football club.

For my part, I will meet the football authorities in the coming months to discuss several relevant matters in the game and will ask them specifically for an update on the progress with Coventry City. In the meantime, I wish the Sky Blues the best of luck against Charlton on Saturday and hope that we can resolve this situation collectively for the hon. Member for Coventry South and the people of Coventry.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.
and in the years ahead this international body will be of growing importance and influence to the UK and its economy as we grow and succeed outside the European Union. A royal yacht is crucial to the leader of our Commonwealth. A royal yacht is vital to the perception around the globe of all that she represents. Our country, and in particular our royal family, have an unmatched global reach.

Britain has the fifth largest economy in the world and remains the third largest maritime power. We as a nation have a unique history in connection with the sea. As an island race, our relationship with the sea is written into our DNA. The relationship has been represented on behalf of our nation, both symbolically and in actuality, by a history of royal yachts stretching back to the restoration of the monarchy with Charles II. We are foolish to have turned our back on the sea and all that it represents for our nation through our failure to renew the royal yacht Britannia in 1997.

I believe that Britain as a nation is partly blind to the necessity, and not a luxury for the head of the British Commonwealth, between whose countries the sea is no barrier, but the natural highway.

My father felt most strongly, as I do, that a yacht was a necessity, and not a luxury for the head of the British Commonwealth, between whose countries the sea is no barrier, but the natural highway.

Britain was decommissioned in 1997 after more than 40 years in service. She conducted 968 official visits and clocked up more than a million miles at sea. In her later years—between 1991 and 1995—she is estimated to have brought £3 billion of commercial trade deals to our country. In 1993, on one trip to India alone, £1.3 billion of trade deals were signed. It is acknowledged that those deals would have squandered it away in the court of public opinion and envy, as happened in 1997 with the decommissioning of the royal yacht Britannia.

It is true that the role of the royal yacht changed since its introduction with Charles II. I would like to concentrate on the contribution that Britannia made to trade at the end of her service. Britannia was decommissioned in 1997 after more than 40 years in service. She conducted 968 official visits and clocked up more than a million miles at sea. In her later years—between 1991 and 1995—she is estimated to have brought £3 billion of commercial trade deals to our country. In 1993, on one trip to India alone, £1.3 billion of trade deals were signed. It is acknowledged that those deals would have been signed in any event, but the presence of Britannia sped up the negotiations from years to days. To put that into the context of the renewal and running of a royal yacht, the deal signed on that one trip would have paid for a royal yacht in its entirety and its annual running costs for 100 years.

During those commercially profitable years, Britannia hosted business figures from across the globe on what were called sea days, on which opportunities were discussed and trade agreements struck. Sea days took place around the coast of Britain and abroad, and were always organised to coincide with an official visit by Britannia. The prestige associated with Britannia attracted prominent figures from commerce and industry to attend the sea days. Invitations were sent in the name of Her Majesty the Queen, with key decision makers in global companies targeted. On occasion, a member of the royal family would also attend. A royal invitation to conduct business on the most exclusive yacht in the world was impossible for even the most successful businesspeople to resist. It is my view that a renewed royal yacht could be used in just that way today.

Hon. Members do not have to take my word for that—they can take the word of Henry Catto, who was the US ambassador to the Court of St James’s between 1989 and 1991. He found himself in the lucky position of being chief of protocol in 1976 when Her Majesty the Queen visited America. He wrote in his book:

“I was literally besieged with people wanting invitations to the various functions on board. Corporate moguls would devise the most outlandish reasons as to why they should be invited; society matrons would throw themselves at me”—

Members are listening now.

“In short, that ship was a superb tool for British industry and the British nation and to let her go and not replace her would be a great pity”.

Compare that with Barack Obama’s comments that the UK would be at the back of the queue in any trade deal with the United States. That shows the huge contribution a new royal yacht could make: we could go from the back of the queue to the front, just by using the power, prestige and global influence of our royal family.

Until now, the European Commission has been responsible for negotiating international trade deals on behalf of EU member states, meaning that the United Kingdom has not had a dedicated team of trade negotiators since 1973. The Minister, who is new in his Department, will acknowledge that negotiating British trade abroad is a huge task, but it would be made significantly easier, in my view, by the royal yacht and by the presence of our royal family.

I hope that I have made the case for the return of the royal yacht for the purposes of trade and explained the role it can play for Britain, but I also want to talk about what I believe a future royal yacht should look like and, crucially, how it should be funded. There are some basic rules we must follow. It must belong to the state, it must fly the white ensign and it must have a strong connection with our royal family. It has to belong to the state so it has the benefit of diplomatic immunity when it visits international harbours around the globe; it has to fly the white ensign, because it is crucial that it is crewed by our Royal Navy; and it has to have a strong connection with our royal family, as that is the unique quality that will make its service to our nation succeed.

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): Is it correct that the old royal yacht Britannia was actually a hospital ship that was used during the course of conflict, and that it was able to make a major contribution in helping our sick and injured servicemen and women?

Jake Berry: That is absolutely correct. I propose that any new royal yacht would again offer a multitude of services, whether as a trade envoy, a hospital ship or a research and development vessel for our science and industry.
There are several proposals for what type of ship we should build, as well as proposals to recommission the existing royal yacht Britannia, which stands proudly in Leith docks. They should all be explored, but I will talk about my personal preference, which is to build a new royal yacht along the lines of the proposals put to the Government in the 1990s. The future royal yacht project envisaged a new ship that would be slightly smaller than Britannia but similar in design. Crucially, it would have an increased range and a much-reduced crewing requirement and would be much cheaper to run. It has been estimated that the ship would cost about £100 million to construct and could be funded either through private donations—for example, by giving industry naming rights for certain decks and rooms—through a private finance initiative model or through public fundraising.

The final idea of the future royal yacht commission was that the Bibby shipping line would construct a new royal yacht, with the Government putting no money whatever toward its construction. The Government would then use it on a bareboat charter basis for 12 years at an estimated cost of £7 million a year. After the initial 12 years’ use had expired, the yacht would become the property of our nation. While those charter figures are historical and may be out of date, I believe that the different ideas out there about how the yacht could be funded show that there are many ways in which we could commission a royal yacht with no up-front cost to the taxpayer.

The reason why I believe a new royal yacht is preferable to recommissioning the existing royal yacht Britannia is that such a vessel is about our country’s future, not its past. It should be a shop window for what is best about Britain and does not live in the United Kingdom, but he must ensure that the cost is spread more logically, in the way that it used to? That was the main bone of contention when I was serving, and it really rankled. We must ensure that the cost is spread more logically, preferably from the private sector, but certainly not by damaging defence. He will know that the yacht will present one whopping great target and will require frigates and destroyers to protect it, and that clearly comes with a cost.

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Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I commend my hon. Friend on his campaign, which I and more than 100 of my colleagues wholeheartedly support. He has mentioned the Government’s relationship with the royal yacht. In view of the clear advantages that a new royal yacht could provide in fostering trade and international relations, does he agree that it might be appropriate if a number of Government Departments were to share the running costs—not least the Department for International Development, which has a rising budget?

Jake Berry: I agree wholeheartedly with my right hon. Friend. It is interesting that some of the countries to which we have recently given, and continue to give, international aid have their own state yacht. India has a state yacht, and it was a recipient of international aid from this country until recently. The Philippines has a state yacht. Turkey has a state yacht. Here in Britain—the fifth largest economy in the world, as I said earlier—we feel it is something we cannot afford. Personally, I think that is a national disgrace.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I very much support my hon. Friend’s campaign and am one of the 100 signatories. Whichever model we choose, can we ensure that it is tasteful and not a gin palace or a Philip Green-type vessel?

My serious and substantive point is that in choosing the Government Departments that may chip in, we must ensure that the Royal Navy does not pick up all of the tab, since the Royal Navy does other things. While it is right that the yacht is badged with the white ensign, will my hon. Friend give some thought to how we can ensure that the Navy in particular does not pick up the tab in the way that it used to? That was the main bone of contention when I was serving, and it really rankled. We must ensure that the cost is spread more logically, preferably from the private sector, but certainly not by damaging defence. He will know that the yacht will present one whopping great target and will require frigates and destroyers to protect it, and that clearly comes with a cost.

Jake Berry: I agree wholeheartedly that the cost should be spread over many Departments. The benefit of setting up a commission is that we could also look at spreading the cost across the Commonwealth. There is no reason why the Canadian navy, the New Zealand navy and navies from other Commonwealth countries could not be involved in crewing or contributing to the royal yacht. In fact, in the most recent proposals for a royal yacht, which were in 2012—it was called the jubilee yacht and was discussed widely in the newspapers at the time—a significant donation of some £10 million was offered by a Canadian financier. He is not British and does not live in the United Kingdom, but he acknowledged the huge opportunity that a royal yacht could bring to the Commonwealth, not just to the United Kingdom. The cost should be shared among Departments, but the commission could also look at the opportunity of sharing the cost among other members of our Commonwealth.
2.52 pm

Danny Kinahan (South Antrim) (UUP): May I congratulate the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry) on introducing such an excellent motion so well? I am very pleased to have the chance to speak today, especially as I missed the chance to sign the letter—I wish I had been able to be part of it.

A few years ago, before the royal yacht was decommissioned, it came to the north coast of Northern Ireland. There was immense pride. It was in all our newspapers, and it lifted everybody. During the royal visit, the yacht invited on board and celebrated the charities and the businessmen we have in Northern Ireland, and did everything that the hon. Gentleman mentioned. When we think about how fantastic a new royal yacht and its work in the Commonwealth could be, another factor is how well the royal family has gone down in Ireland, and all the work Ireland and Northern Ireland have to do together. Whether Prince Charles’s visit last year or the Queen’s momentous visit to Dublin, they illustrate what a new royal yacht could do for us, not only in Europe but in the whole world.

I was interested to hear the suggestions for how we would finance the royal yacht. One of my greatest concerns when I looked at this was how we could finance it—could PFIs work? Could donors help? Could the Commonwealth get involved? Today we have had presented to us an excellent idea of how that could be achievable. I want to see the best of industry involved. We want the new royal yacht to be an example of what is best—not a gaudy gin palace, as has been said, but the mark of everything that is best about the United Kingdom. We must set that target in place and all work together. This is a fantastic idea, and I am glad to be here to support it.

2.54 pm

Sir Gerald Howarth (Aldershot) (Con): I too am delighted to serve under your leadership, Mr Chope, and wish to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry) on this initiative and on an excellent speech. I was involved in this campaign when I was at the Ministry of Defence about five years ago. I believe profoundly in this cause, so I am delighted that my hon. Friend has taken it up. One of the darker moments of my political life was the picture of Her Majesty the Queen standing on the dockside with something of a tear in her eye as the royal yacht Britannia was finally decommissioned. It was a great disservice to Her Majesty. Let us hope therefore that we can now put that error right.
Dr Murrison: I succeeded my hon. Friend in ministerial office. He will remember, as I do, the effectiveness of running trade missions from the back of destroyers and frigates, not only for defence and security but a range of British export possibilities. How much more effective does he think this yacht will be, going around the world projecting what is best in British export, than those very effective trade missions in which he and I were involved?

Sir Gerald Howarth: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. I recall signing a treaty with the Brazilians aboard HMS Ocean. It was very instructive because of what the Brazilian Defence Minister said to me at our first meeting. Apropos of nothing, he stretched out his hand and said, “There is only one Navy in the world, Minister.” He paused and said, “It is true the United States has a Navy, but there is only one Navy: the Royal Navy.” Why should a Brazilian say that? Because of Admiral Sir Thomas Cochrane. There is not a child in Brazil or Chile who has not heard of him. Sadly, thanks to our education system, there is not a child in the United Kingdom who has heard of him. He was once the Member of Parliament for Westminster and the amazing liberator of Brazil and Chile from foreign rule. We are respected around the world and a new royal yacht would add to that. My hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen has made the case for trade, so I will not repeat it.

I also agree that the new ship must fly under the white ensign in the name of the Royal Navy. That will of course add to the cost, and we all know about the enormous pressure on naval personnel and on the MOD budget more generally, so, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) suggested, the cost of acquisition should be split between four Government Departments: the MOD, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Foreign Office and, of course, the rich as Crosses Department for International Development. We have to find something good to come out of its money.

Finally, I do not think anything exemplified the enormous respect and affection that the British people have for Her Majesty the Queen as much as the diamond jubilee. What struck people was the extraordinary selfless service that she has given to our nation. We as a nation ought to reflect the profound thanks that our people have for Her Majesty the Queen over 60 years by procuring a new royal yacht, in her name and on her behalf, to serve the purposes set out in this debate, as that would be an enduring way of marking the most astonishing period of leadership by our sovereign, Her Majesty the Queen. So I say, “Rule, Britannia”.

3.2 pm

Deidre Brock: That semantic point is appreciated. The yacht is promoted as the museum piece that she is, harking back to a time that cannot be recaptured: a piece from the days of steamships, polished and gleaming from bow to stern, beautifully cared for as a floating curiosity, but not a working ship, so recommissioning is out of the question. I assume Members have had a look at the YouGov poll and seen that the building of a new royal yacht is not supported. In fact, only among Conservative voters, by 41% to 39%, are there more people in favour of building it than not. So I ask: why would you ask about whether the money to build and run a new ship could be justified, even Conservative voters turn against it.

It is notable, too, that Scotland has a more solid opposition to the idea than anywhere else: 60% against recommissioning, 66% against buying a new one and 68% think the costs cannot be justified. The costs, which are important at a time when working families have joined benefit claimants in the queues at food banks, are simply unjustifiable. We have heard there are lots of ways in which the yacht could be funded, but we have heard no firm proposals. As usual, the burden would fall on the long-suffering taxpayer. Like PFI and PPP and every other cunning plan that Governments come up with, it would cost the public purse, not private finance.

As has been mentioned, the old yacht had a crew of 250 and 21 officers drawn from the Navy. On royal duty it had a platoon of marines on board and warships accompanying it. I am guessing the Navy’s top brass do not have a new royal yacht as their dearest ambition, given the current state of their resources. Then we get to the capital costs. Are they to come from a defence budget already groaning under the pressure of carrying Trident, or are they to come from another part of the public purse? Given what we hear repeatedly about the shortages of equipment that armed forces personnel face, can anyone justify adding another capital spend to that burden?

Jake Berry: I thank the hon. Lady for her contribution to the debate. I think she is arguing that the public should not pay for the royal yacht, but would she support a royal yacht if it was funded privately?

Deidre Brock: The public say they are not supportive of the recommissioning of the yacht. That does not take into the account the running costs, which it has been suggested will come from several Departments, including the Department for International Trade. If the intent is to take the capital spend and running costs from elsewhere in the public purse, where will that blow fall? Given the austerity fetish that the former Chancellor inflicted on all of us and the reported comments of the current Chancellor that he intends to deliver on all of the already planned cuts, where exactly is the spare cash to come from? And how exactly does anyone square the fact that benefit sanctions mean that the poorest, weakest and most disadvantaged people are left to go cold and hungry, but we will all be paying for what must seem to them a new pleasure cruiser for the royal family? This is just a wistful throwback to the days of the Raj, a pleading with history to run backwards and ignore the dodgy bits on the way. This is a rosily tinted fiction of a
time that never was, a fond imagining that empire was a good thing and that fine gentlemen rise to the occasion upon demand.

It is reminiscent of John Major’s thoughts when he said,

“Fifty years from now Britain will still be the country of long shadows on county grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers and pools fillers and—as George Orwell said—‘old maids bicycling to Holy Communion through the morning mist’ and if we get our way—Shakespeare still read even in school. Britain will survive unamendable in all essentials.”

He was actually talking about why the UK should remain in the European Union. The current fantasy is a fairy story from the imagination of Brexiteers who imagine the UK has only to denounce the EU to rise again to great heights.

The sad and sorry Britannia plan sounds like the regrets of someone who has missed their chance drawing the tattered remnants of their dreams around them for whatever warmth they can offer while the world rushes by uncaringly. Flash-boat democracy has no place in the modern world, which has changed utterly from the day in 1997 that Britannia was decommissioned. We have emails, electronic trading, smartphones with more computing power than the moon landing craft, and entire businesses that exist only online. This is a different world from the world in which the yacht was decommissioned, never mind the world in which it was commissioned in the first place.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): The hon. Lady is obviously having a lot of fun with her caricature. She may have noticed that both Mr Letts and Mr Hope are scribbling down furiously everything she says. None the less, did she not hear what my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry) said about the possibilities of the new royal yacht for creating more business opportunities, more revenue, ultimately more tax revenue and therefore more money for the Government for nurses and teachers?

Deidre Brock: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. I also heard that Blair Force One is still current. I cannot see why that is not being used, as apparently it should be, for trade throughout the world.

Several hon. Members rose—

Deidre Brock: I am almost finished. I do not see why we need to commission another yacht at a cost of £60 million in 1997, allegedly £100 million now, and then running costs unknown. The running costs were £66 million between 1990 and 1997. What are those costs today? We have no idea.

As I said, this is a different world. If Members want economic revival they should ask for austerity to be eased, and spending resumed. If they really want international trade to improve, they will petition for UK embassies to be retooled as permanent trade missions. If they want to get on their feet and build an economy they should dump the daft ideas and get on with the serious hard work that is needed. It is what their constituents deserve. They can hang a new bauble on the jacket of the UK as it shuffles down the road, but that does nothing to feed a hungry child, support a struggling industry or boost a flagging economy. Dump the bauble. Get wise about what we have to do now.

3.10 pm

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): I had thought that there was a parliamentary convention that we did not refer to the royal family, but I imagine it has been waived for this debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry) on obtaining the debate and notifying me about it. I look forward to hearing from the Minister, who will I understand be making his maiden ministerial speech, if there is such a thing. My hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen drew our attention to the fact that many national newspapers support the campaign: that is a very good start. There can surely not be a better year in which to consider the issue than when Her Majesty the Queen is 90 years old. My hon. Friend has already referred to the outstanding service that she has given the country.

I visited Britannia when she was in service. I remember that really there were two ships—the front run by the Navy and the rear an amazing platform for entertaining and persuading people to our interests. I think, from memory, that the dining room table would seat 50. It was a splendid boat. Interestingly, Her Majesty’s quarters were unbelievably spartan, so there was nothing for the Green camp to look at there. It was very rough and ready accommodation.

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that what is different about having a new royal yacht now is that we are sailing into a brave new world, and that we will do, and need to do, many more trade deals across the world? There is a great opportunity not only to support the royal family, but to support the nation in getting those trade deals.

David Tredinnick: I agree, and I like my hon. Friend’s metaphor about sailing out into a brave new world. We are certainly in a brave new world.

I was, like you, Mr Chope, in the House in 1997 during both the Major Government and the Labour Government, when they took over. I remember the debate on the royal yacht as a complete shambles. The proposition that there should be a new royal yacht was introduced at the end of the Parliament. The failure to secure Labour support was lamentable, and the then Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup, Sir Edward Heath, described it as an extraordinary mistake. It was perhaps no surprise that when Labour took power Gordon Brown knocked the project on the head. I still think that, if there had been all-party negotiations at the time, earlier in the Parliament, we would not have been having this debate, because the decision would have been carried, but it was too close to a general election and it was too difficult for Labour after the general election.

My hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen has admitted that trade deals that happened on the royal yacht might have happened anyway, but I note the £3 billion of deals that he said were made, and the extraordinary amount of business done on one visit to India. The yacht was always going to provide a tipping point for major deals. I think that that is one of the
crucial aspects of the recommissioning of the yacht—the lady, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr Gray) would probably like her to be considered.

A new royal yacht that does not earn its keep will not, I think, have public support. I thought that we had already disposed of the point about its being a charge on the public purse. The idea is that it should not be. My hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Sir Gerald Howarth) was saying that the cost would be split between four Departments and that we are not talking about a new vessel paid for by some kind of non-governmental subscription, which would be paid back by virtue of the fact that the vessel was the royal yacht and that possibly it would have another role when not being used by Her Majesty.

Incidentally, the royal yacht would of course have to fly the white ensign for security and docking purposes, but it would also fly a totally different set of flags for Her Majesty, one of which would be the flag of a Lord High Admiral, which, from memory, is a deep red colour with an anchor on it. So there would be no dispute about who was on board at any time.

The point made by other hon. Members about Brexit is also relevant. This is a fantastic time for us to build this new flagship of the nation.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that, as he has just mentioned, this is a perfect time to recommission a royal yacht? I have no doubt that we will make trade deals with it, and that in due course it will fund itself and help with diplomacy; but it will send out a massive signal to the world, once we unshackle ourselves from the dead hand of Brussels, that the British are back—confident, proud and outward-looking.

David Tredinnick: I thank my hon. Friend; there could not possibly be a better time. We need statements of confidence at a time when our currency is fluctuating and there is a degree of uncertainty. It is about our nations coming up to the plate and saying, “Yes, we believe in ourselves.”

My hon. Friend the Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison), who is a former Defence Minister, touched on the fact that the royal yacht is always accompanied by a warship, usually a frigate. It is also worth making the point that it would be a very secure vessel for Her Majesty and whoever else was present for trade reasons. At a time of cyber-attacks and all kinds of other attacks it is probably better to be in a secure space, as was the case for Her Majesty on her royal visits.

One of the ideas that was mooted was a royal commission. The metaphor for royal commissions is grass so dark and long that one can never see through it. Their history shows that they take for ever. Why on earth do we need a royal commission when surely the money around a table, and come to some agreement simple approach would be to get good people with good earth do we need a royal commission when surely the

David Tredinnick: I hear what my hon. Friend says. I do not think that in my midlands constituency there is support for a new royal yacht that is not paid for by some form of subscription. I do not think that people want it to be a charge on the taxpayer. The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), who made a flamboyant and exciting speech, would certainly be in that camp.

We would not be having this debate in the first place if the matter had been dealt with properly in 1997. The case for a new royal yacht is overwhelming, provided that the money to fund it comes from the private and not the public sector.

Mr Christopher Chope (in the Chair): I invite Ian Paisley to follow the example of his colleague from the other part of Antrim, so that we have the opportunity also to hear the hon. Members from Plymouth and Portsmouth who wish to participate, before the winding-up speeches start at half-past 3.

3.19 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Chope, for calling me in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry) on bringing this important matter to the House. I will be brief, as you have requested, Mr Chope. In fact, I feel like bursting into song and singing, “Rule, Britannia! Britannia rules the waves! Many, many jobs she intends to save!” I hope that we can get to that point. I hope that the Minister will get on with it, commission the report, commission the work and ensure that we soon have on the high seas this floating advertisement for all that is wonderful about the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

The question has been posed as to who will build the ship. Well, if the Scots Nats do not want to build it, we have a shipyard in Ulster. The Ulstermen will happily rise to the opportunity to rivet those steel joints together and make that boat for Ulster and for the United Kingdom.

The question is not only who should build the ship, but what will be on board. I hope that it is an advertisement for all that is great—the great foods that we produce and the great products that we have. Perhaps there will even be room enough for a great bus, built in County Antrim, that we can advertise around the world. We will be able to show the many trading opportunities that we have to other parts of the world. We may even have a whisky on board—I hope that we will have the whiskey with an e, which is made in Bushmills. Mr Chope, do you know why it has an e? Because it is excellent; that is why it is there.
Where will this ship go? I hope that it goes everywhere on the high seas. From no port should it be turned away. Nowhere shall it be said that the British will not have the opportunity to sell their wares in, yes, this new opportunity to promote trade deals and to promote the United Kingdom post-Brexit.

However, the most important question, which has been posed by the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen, is of course who should pay for the ship. That does deserve rigorous and serious challenge, because at this point we do not require the taxpayer to fork out for everything. There will be perfect harmony in the opportunity for the public, private and charitable sectors to work together to bring about this idea and to ensure that we finally deliver on it and get the ship on to our seas. Therefore, I commend it. I wave the opportunity Godspeed and I hope that the Minister will not torpedo it but support it.

Mrs Flick Drummond (Portsmouth South) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry) on securing this interesting debate.

Her Majesty’s Yacht Britannia was based in Portsmouth dockyard and for decades was a familiar sight to my constituents and visitors. She was based at South Railway jetty, the traditional dock for royalty and distinguished visitors travelling by sea. From there she could be seen by every ship coming and going from Portsmouth when she was alongside. There was therefore considerable sadness when Britannia was removed from service without the prospect of a replacement. Portsmouth expects, should Britannia be replaced, that we will be her home again.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that actually the only true home for the new royal yacht Britannia should be the country’s only royal harbour—Ramsgate, in my constituency?

Mrs Drummond: That might be one of the cinque ports, but I still think that Portsmouth will be the best place.

There is an excellent case for renewing the role of Britannia as a floating base for UK diplomacy. The royal family are a formidable and hard-working element of the UK’s soft power mission, and a ship equipped with conferencing and hospitality facilities offers them a great base. However, Britannia was not just a floating hotel, but a symbol in her own right of the prestige and reputation of the UK. Many of the deals done by UK exporters aboard Britannia were won without the presence of the royal family, but with the aura of “Great Britain” very much present. It is worth noting that our competitors recognise the usefulness of ships employed in that way, as my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen said. Many nations operate training ships that actually serve to promote their national interests. The Chinese Government, for instance, have just commissioned a new one.

The motion refers to re-introducing the Britannia but, like other hon. Members, I hope that we will be looking to build a modern replacement for her. Whether this is done by reactivation or replacement, there are some basic principles that the Government should adhere to. First, her home, like Britannia’s, should be Portsmouth. Secondly, as a vessel operated and supported by the Royal Navy, she must be an effective means in terms of either manpower or budget. A good argument for replacing Britannia is that her systems are somewhat outdated and labour-intensive compared with those of modern vessels. She is a steam-age ship in a digital world, with a relatively short range compared with equivalent modern vessels. She could showcase outstanding products from the UK marine sector in her design and build. If the ship exists partly to promote British trade, it follows that not all the burden of paying for her should fall on the MOD budget or, indeed, the taxpayer. Thirdly, her operational use must be as wide as possible. By all means title her a “royal yacht”, but she should be capable of adapting as need requires.

Britannia was designed to operate as a hospital ship in times of crisis, but that happened only once, during a humanitarian crisis in Aden. Alternatively, this ship could be used more intensively than Britannia was, as a mobile educational facility around the UK. We are a country dependent on the sea for our past security and future prosperity, yet the sea is being left behind. Air travel is the long-distance mode of transport that dominates our everyday thoughts, but it is not actually the most important: 80% of all world trade is seaborne and more than 90% of Britain’s trade, by volume and value, travels by sea; we still rely on sea trade for much of our food.

In Portsmouth, the museums and ships in our historic dockyard are a permanent reminder of the importance of the Royal Navy and the seas to our national story. Britannia could be a mobile showcase for the importance of the maritime industry to people around the UK. The overwhelming majority of space in our dockyard is engaged in maintaining a Royal Navy that is at the leading edge of technology and is supported by a defence sector that drives a great deal of innovation in the civil as well as the naval and military fields.

The sea-blindness that I referred to is hard to understand, given the importance of the sea and the maritime sector to our lives. We know from the maritime growth study, published a year ago, that the maritime industries sector contributes more than £11 billion a year to our economy. It is bigger than aerospace and on a par with our world-leading pharmaceutical sector. It may represent only 5% of our employment base, but it is a vital part of our manufacturing and service sectors.

A revived Britannia could tell that story and promote the skills and technology of the sea at home as well as abroad. I hope that the Government will look carefully at the options for renewing the capability that Britannia provided, by whatever means, and will recognise that it could give us a competitive edge in world trade and diplomacy.
best foot forward by going out and getting as much trade as we possibly can. That will be absolutely vital. Needless to say, I would like the new ship to be built in Plymouth, either by Princess Yachts, which is one of our great luxury yacht producers, or by Babcock, which is responsible for managing and running the oldest naval dockyard in the country.

In 2020, Plymouth will commemorate the Mayflower leaving Plymouth to go and found the American colonies. That gives us a unique opportunity to have a fantastic trade exhibition down in the south-west. The country needs to grab that opportunity with both hands, in no uncertain terms. By building Britannia down in Plymouth, the Government could stimulate and create a tourist attraction. If we are successful, we could also have a fleet review, or even a review of the NATO fleet. That would encourage tourists to come to our wonderful part of the south-west. Britain needs to encourage American tourists to come here.

It is absolutely brilliant that the Minister who will be responding to the debate is the former commodore of the House of Commons yacht club. My final point to him is that the Duke of Edinburgh, Prince Philip, is the High Steward of Plymouth, and we should send him a clear message that we support having the ship rebuilt and relocated to Plymouth.

3.30 pm

Mr Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Chope. I thank and congratulate the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry) for securing this entertaining and interesting debate. The enthusiasm of Conservative Members and the sparsity of Labour Members in the Chamber will be spotted by those elsewhere.

I like the fact that the UK is looking up and wants to catch up with the great powers of the world: Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway and Saudi Arabia—places with royal yachts. It is great to see the UK having such ambition to catch those countries, and good luck to it in doing that. Perhaps the royal yacht will be the answer, but I do not think it will.

I am very familiar with the former royal yacht Britannia. As a child, I used to see it often behind the island of Vatersay, from Castlebay. Its three masts were seen every August as the Queen went on a cruise around Vatersay, from Castlebay. Its three masts were seen every August as the Queen went on a cruise around Vatersay, from Castlebay.

Mrs Drummond: And Plymouth.

Mr MacNeil: And Plymouth, sorry.

It was pointed out that Her Majesty is Queen of 16 realms, and that perhaps Commonwealth countries could contribute to the yacht, which might mean that they would want it themselves for rambling trade expeditions across the world. Who knows? I think they would be reluctant to call it Britannia in that case; they might want to call it The Commonwealth. Otherwise it might fuel awful sentiments, such as republicanism in Australia, if people were paying their taxes to contribute to a yacht for a far-off country.

That brings me to the name: Britannia. I thought some hon. Members might have looked at the opportunity of having the yacht for the 100th anniversary of the UK, which will fall in December 2022 when the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland becomes 100 years old. That opportunity was missed—perhaps there is some nervousness that Britannia as currently constituted might find itself being two states before that date, with the boat perhaps needing to be called Scotia.

The answer to the calamity facing the UK is not a yacht, which I think a number of hon. Members, in the back of their minds, really do feel. The answer is not the superstitious notion that all future trade success depends on having a royal yacht. The idea that getting to the front of the queue is based on having a royal yacht belongs on the back of a fag packet. It is not the back of a yacht that gets nations to the front of the queue; it is the professionalism of being a good trading nation and having negotiators—the UK currently has two dozen, but it needs about 200. There is a real danger that the UK could be mugged at international negotiations because it does not have the experience of small places like the Faroe Islands or Iceland, which have 50,000 and 300,000 people respectively. Those are the issues that should be bothering the UK.

Top trading nations do not have a royal yacht. China does not have a royal yacht, the USA does not have a royal yacht, Germany does not have a royal yacht. Nor do South Korea, France, Hong Kong or Italy, and all those nations are ahead of the UK.

Oliver Colville: The countries the hon. Gentleman has just talked about do not have a royal family; we do.

Mr MacNeil: I am not sure what point the hon. Gentleman is making, because they are ahead of us in trading. As a monarchist myself, I do not particularly like the republican sentiments he is leaning towards by indicating that we might be better off in trading if we were a republic. I do not find that at all appealing.

If the UK were able to build a ship, could it not be doing so now? The idea that the Conservatives have suddenly become Keynesians and are looking for a fiscal stimulus to ignite industry across the country rings hollow, particularly when we have seen the fetish of austerity, as my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) said.

The hostility to the gin market today has surprised me—I would have thought that people could have supported the gin industry, but no. Hon. Members have shown some hostility towards it this afternoon, although happily the whisky industry, in which Scotland excels, was not included in that.

The hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) made a serious point about a royal yacht being a very big target. A lot of royal naval assets would be tied up in ensuring its safety. In the world we are in at the moment, it would be a sitting duck, and it would cost an awful lot of money to make sure it was safe. In fact, although the costs were put at £7 million a year to finance the boat back on charter from her owners, the crew of about 250, which the royal yacht had, would
cost about £7.5 million to £12 million in wages, and the officers would cost a further £1.2 million. That is not including the cost of defending the yacht, which was the important point that the hon. Gentleman made.

Reality came crashing into the debate in the fantastic speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh North and Leith, which some of the hon. Gentlemen present greeted with, indeed, great honour and gentlemanliness. She made a great point about food banks and cuts to social services. To add to that, with the pound crashing, the current projections of costs for the royal yacht may go further north. She correctly made a point about the shortage of armed forces equipment. It is a rose-tinted fiction that we will have a royal yacht, and then all will be well with the situation the UK has found itself in.

This debate has shown that the UK has found itself in some sort of trouble, but I say to colleagues that the answer is not the comfort blanket of a royal yacht. In fact, to the outside world the idea will look bizarre. I cannot wait to see “The Daily Show” with Trevor Noah; the previous presenter Jon Stewart had great fun a few years ago with the UK’s fetish for shipping on the Thames, but this will be seen as high comedy across the world. The idea is that a royal yacht will make Britain great again—I cannot remember which hon. Member said Britain was not great. He did not exactly say that, but he implied that Britain was not great by saying that the yacht would make Britain great again. Another hon. Member said that Britain would stand tall in the world, indicating that Britain does not stand tall in the world at the moment. Indeed, it does not, because of Brexit. It is a laughing stock from Reykjavik to Buenos Aires—that is the reality, and building a royal yacht would only add to that. I am sorry to say that to hon. Members, and I wish them well in what they are trying to do, but the idea of having the comfort blanket of a royal yacht is barking up the wrong tree.

3.37 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Captain Chope, I pay tribute to your skill in charting this debate away from the rocks and along its voyage. I note the gentlemen of the press waiting, acid pens poised to keelhaul anyone indicating that Britain does not stand tall in the world. No, the previous presenter Jon Stewart had great fun a few years ago with the UK’s fetish for shipping on the Thames, but this will be seen as high comedy across the world. The idea is that a royal yacht will make Britain great again—I cannot remember which hon. Member said Britain was not great. He did not exactly say that, but he implied that Britain was not great by saying that the yacht would make Britain great again. Another hon. Member said that Britain would stand tall in the world, indicating that Britain does not stand tall in the world at the moment. Indeed, it does not, because of Brexit. It is a laughing stock from Reykjavik to Buenos Aires—that is the reality, and building a royal yacht would only add to that. I am sorry to say that to hon. Members, and I wish them well in what they are trying to do, but the idea of having the comfort blanket of a royal yacht is barking up the wrong tree.

Barry Gardiner: If nothing else, the hon. Gentleman and I are agreed on our admiration for Sir Thomas Cochrane. Of course, he was not readmitted to the Royal Navy until 1832 and, in 1806—he later admitted—he bribed the electors of Honiton by paying each 10 guineas so that he could enter this place, so perhaps he was not always a model that we should aspire to follow.

Here we are once again debating the recommissioning of a yacht that was launched some 63 years ago, as if it were the missing part of the Government’s international trade plan. Unfortunately, it is not. What is most troubling is that it seems to be, if not the only part, certainly one of the more credible parts. When it comes to international trade negotiations, the Government are not very able seamen, who have found themselves drifting rudderless into uncharted waters. A decommissioned boat, however, is not the ideal vessel to pilot their way out.

The recent EU referendum has presented significant challenges about what our future trading relations will look like and how we can go about ensuring that Britain and the British people can benefit. British businesses have relied on access to the single market since it came into force in 1993. Before that, they relied on the reduced tariffs of the customs union that preceded it. Few British businesses, and even fewer British business leaders, will recall just what difficulties were encountered when attempting international trade before that.

Furthermore, our participation in the European project and our membership of the customs union and the subsequent single market made the UK an extremely attractive destination for foreign investment. I do not doubt that that was enhanced by our strong international network, our respect for the rule of law and the dominance of English as an international language, but it is equally foolish to identify our success as having stemmed exclusively from our attributes and not from the access that we enjoy to the world’s largest consumer market. Our trading capacity is a manifestation of our attributes combined with our access to and capacity to influence the regulations of that wider market. Chance and good fortune also played their part, because our capacity to engage in and lead international trade is greatly magnified by virtue of our geography, location and time zone.

A combination of those elements has enabled us to play a leading role in international affairs and trade throughout history, and is why we have been able to continue to attract business investment and promote British exports overseas. It takes time to develop markets, and requires thorough analysis. It take confidence on the part of investors and trust on the part of trading partners.
Today, I am wearing the tie of Polska Zegluga Morska, the Polish steamship company. I put it on quite deliberately this morning, not because the royal yacht was built as a steamship, but because in 1989, because the Berlin wall came down, I began my first trade mission to Poland. Over the next five years, I took delegations from Maritime London, and put on conferences and trade missions in Poland, Ukraine and Russia to open up the market for our marine services industry—our lawyers, insurance brokers, protection and indemnity clubs, engineers and marine surveyors. I know what it is to export into new markets, and I inform the House that it is not about a flash yacht. It comes through diligent market research, understanding the regulatory structures and identifying the gaps that a team or product can fill. That is not doom-mongering or “Project Fear”; it is a reasoned assessment of the factors that feed into successful exports.

The Brexit vote threatens our trading capacity because it makes the questions about regulatory structures and market gaps impossible to answer. Businesses have no idea at the moment which markets they will be able to do business in, nor at what cost. They have no idea about the regulatory framework they will face or which non-tariff barriers they will encounter. They do not know whether they will be able to retain foreign staff or fill recruitment gaps from overseas if they need to.

Investors now see the decision to invoke article 50 as soon as possible as prejudicing the very possibility of a stable transition whereby the answers to those questions can be methodically worked through. We cannot know the extent of the investment decisions that are being suspended or cancelled.

Karl McCartney (Lincoln) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Barry Gardiner: Because of the time, I will not. Certain things are literally incalculable, but that does not make them less certain. Such investment decisions are being made, and they will have a long-tail liability—a liability that might only crystallise over years to come.

The idea that we could relaunch an ancient yacht as a beacon of British innovation and enterprise is entirely symptomatic of the nostalgic nonsense that has infected the Government’s approach to the new trading relationship that we must develop in a post-referendum world once the UK leaves the EU. We face the biggest constitutional and commercial challenge of our lifetimes, and we are here today to discuss relaunching a long-retired yacht. The Germans and the French must be quaking—not in their boots, but with laughter. The Chinese and the Americans, who are looking on in astonishment, must be wondering why we are incapable of seeing the gravity of our own situation.

It greatly concerns me that this debate sends a signal to the rest of the world that we still see the best of Britain as being behind us. We are a world leader in financial and legal services, the automotive and engineering sectors, pharmaceuticals, biosciences, business, energy, construction, fashion, art and music. But at this precise moment—when the fashion and textiles industry is asking where it will get linkers from in a post-Brexit world, when Nissan and Jaguar Land Rover are suspending future investment decisions until they have clarity on market access, and when the pharmaceutical sector is at its wits’ end over losing the European Medicines Agency from the UK—the best that this Government can come up with, as they studiously avoid giving us a running commentary, is to bring us here today to debate the recommissioning of Her Majesty’s yacht Britannia.

Government is not about playing with toy boats as virility symbols. The Government should be engaging with British business and setting out strategic proposals on an industry-by-industry basis, to promote Britain and our exports overseas. They need to tell the financial services industry—our biggest export sector—how they propose to protect the passporting regime that has allowed British financial institutions to transact business across the EU. That facility has been material to our capacity to attract foreign banks to establish their European operations throughout the UK. Those banks are now openly discussing and actively investigating relocations to Dublin, Paris, Frankfurt or Luxembourg.

Given how many trade missions the royal yacht Britannia undertook on behalf of the British Invisible Exports Council, perhaps the Back Benchers who signed the letter supporting the motion might better spend their time exploring the threats to the financial services industry in the UK. How much would it cost to refit a yacht of that size and bring it up to modern technological standards? How much would it cost to crew and maintain the vessel? How many Royal Navy staff would be taken away from active service elsewhere to crew the yacht? What security and counter-terrorism measures would need to be undertaken to ensure that the yacht would not be a sitting duck terrorist target?

Mr Christopher Chope (in the Chair): Order. The convention is that Front Benchers have 10 minutes to wind up. The hon. Gentleman has already been speaking for 11 minutes. It would be helpful if the Minister had time to respond and the proposer of the motion was able to have the last word.

Barry Gardiner: Captain Chope, I apologise. I had not realised that the time had gone so fast. I will conclude my remarks there.

3.48 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Trade (Mark Garnier): It is a great pleasure to follow the shadow Secretary of State for International Trade with his surfeit of maritime metaphors and his admiration for Admiral Sir Thomas Cochrane.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Jake Berry) on securing the debate. The topic is clearly a subject of great passion for many people across the House. I, for one, have always been a great fan of the royal yacht, which has been involved in many totemic events in our history, not least on 1 July 1997, when it slipped its moorings at HMS Tamar, rounded Hong Kong island and set off into the South China sea as the Union flag was lowered for the final time on the crown colony of Hong Kong.

I will pick up on a couple of points raised in the debate. The first is the recommissioning of the royal yacht in support of trade promotion. It is pretty clear that this Chamber is not in favour of that at all, which is right. In 1997 it was calculated that buying an extra five years for the former royal yacht would have cost £17 million and an extra 20 years would have cost £20 million. The former royal yacht is clearly well past its active life.
[Mark Garnier]

The second proposal is the potential commissioning of a new royal yacht in support of trade promotion, and I will take this opportunity to provide some context for the role and purpose of the Department for International Trade. The new Department has overall responsibility for promoting British trade across the world under the leadership of my right hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Dr Fox). We will bang the drum for Britain across the world and pull out all the stops in boosting our trade, working with our overseas diplomatic missions to promote the UK as a place to do business and to trade with, driving inward investment and, in time, negotiating trade agreements. The Department will be the key player in selling the UK through exports and trade promotion, negotiating trade deals and attracting foreign direct investment into the UK. The Department will use any and all resources and assets at its disposal to secure those agreements and to boost our trade.

The royal yacht Britannia was, and is, an iconic symbol of Great Britain. As the second royal yacht to bear the name Britannia, and the 83rd such royal vessel, she was for more than 40 years an instantly recognisable feature on the seas as a representation of the United Kingdom, our royal family and our diplomatic service, and as a platform to showcase the best of the United Kingdom. Britannia’s primary role, at which she excelled, was to provide a base for the royal family’s national and international engagements, for which she sailed more than 1 million miles, undertaking just under 8,000 engagements—272 of those engagements were within British waters.

Britannia was the first ocean-going royal yacht, and her primary role was to provide a base for the royal family when going overseas. Before the royal yacht was built, the royal family used to—“hijack” is the wrong word—take control of an ocean liner or a royal naval warship and use it as their base, but the yacht’s secondary role was to provide a base from which the UK could engage with other Governments through diplomacy to secure trade and investment opportunities. Thirdly, of course, HMY Britannia had a reserve role as a potential medical facility in the event of conflict, a role for which she was fortunately never required but, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond), she was used for the evacuation of Aden in 1986, when she evacuated 1,000 people of 44 different nationalities.

The royal yacht’s multifunctional role made it unique and special, projecting the United Kingdom’s diplomatic influence and reflecting the United Kingdom’s proud heritage as a seafaring trading nation. We are determined to make a success of our global role in the world, but recommissioning the royal yacht Britannia is not something which the Government are considering at all. We will listen to the cases being proposed, but there are clear issues on feasibility and cost. The existing ship is a popular tourist attraction in Edinburgh.

Although there is no doubt that Britannia presents an impressive backdrop to the signing of trade and investment deals, there was and is much more to negotiations, which involve discussion and hard graft behind the scenes away from the pomp and splendour of the signing table—my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen said that although £3 billion-worth of trade deals were done, there is no conclusive evidence that the deals would not have been signed were it not for the royal yacht. Such hard work is central to the Department for International Trade’s responsibility to successfully negotiate trade agreements when we leave the EU in order to secure the UK’s economic future.

Today’s debate proposes the reintroduction of the royal yacht, which is currently moored in Scotland as a popular visitor attraction. Twenty years ago, the then Government proposed a replacement for Britannia, which was then more than 40 years old and in need of overhaul or replacement. Of course, as we know, the decision was taken to retire her without replacement. More recently, the royal yacht has been moored at the port of Leith and receives hundreds of thousands of visitors every year. The cost of reintroduction, including major overhaul to the engines, has not been explored but, as I mentioned earlier, even in 1997 it would have been very expensive. I also have no doubt that making moves to commandeer Britannia from her current home in Scotland would be strongly resisted—that point has been made vociferously.

As we have heard, there are also proposals to commission a new royal yacht, which many Members and organisations would support. As my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Oliver Colvile) said, I was once commodore of the House of Commons yacht club—I am not entirely certain that I do not still hold that position—and as such I am a natural ally of all things offshore, but hard facts stand in the way of a new yacht, not least the need for significant levels of funding to commission, build, fit out and maintain the vessel. We have heard that a vessel could be funded from outside sources, but a new yacht would require the latest design and technology, which the United Kingdom is best placed to provide. That would come at a cost, and we have yet to find out exactly how the yacht would be funded.

Media coverage over the past fortnight has included an alleged proposal for a replacement yacht from almost 20 years ago. Although it was not an official proposal, the figure of £60 million to build the new yacht would now likely be double that. There is also the additional cost to the taxpayer of operation and maintenance, which would need to be factored in.

Sir Gerald Howarth: I welcome the Minister to his role but, for goodness’ sake, let us place this in context. We spend £12 billion a year on overseas aid and, although it may not be possible to itemise exactly how much the royal yacht Britannia delivered in trade deals, the sentiment in this Chamber today is explicit that a new royal yacht at a modest £120 million would deliver for the British people a statement of our intent post-Brexit and would deliver a return on investment to the British economy.

Mark Garnier: I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s intervention, and I know he is passionate about this subject and Sir Thomas Cochrane, but we have not seen a business proposal or a cost-benefit analysis, so this debate is slightly hypothetical. The international development budget is separate from this discussion. We are talking about trade not international development, which is slightly different. I think we would all be keen to see my hon. Friend make a business proposal, and no one is trying to stop him.
The former royal yacht was crewed by the Royal Navy and, as we have heard, there are three particular factors that need to be taken into account. A new royal yacht would fly the white ensign, would be state owned and would function as a floating royal palace, which means that the royal yacht would have to be manned by the Royal Navy. That would put pressure on the senior service. Even once those financial challenges were potentially overcome through private sponsors and donations, it would not negate the ongoing liability for 10, 20 or 40 years.

I also wonder whether a new yacht would provide the best return on investment. From 1989 to 1996, Britannia undertook 37 visits in support of UK exports and investment, which is not a huge number when we consider that in some years it cost as much as £12 million to run—it was expensive. Of those visits, more than a quarter were around the United Kingdom. We have new routes in emerging markets, and we have stronger ties and partnerships than ever before that have helped to secure our position as an open, outward-facing trading nation. It is also worth bearing in mind that we have 270 posts and missions across the world where we are flying the flag for Britain and going out to promote our country, which is important.

The Department was set up with the purpose of ensuring that we seize every opportunity that leaving the EU presents to forge a new way in the world and to make Britain a global leader in free trade. I am acutely aware that people in this room are firmly behind the proposal, but I make it clear that the Government have no plans, and have had no plans, to commission a new royal yacht. As such, it is very unlikely indeed that we would use taxpayers’ money to fund either a royal commission or an investigation into whether we could commission a new royal yacht.

3.58 pm  
Jake Berry: I thank all colleagues who have attended and supported today’s debate. I also thank you, Mr Chope, for being such an excellent Chairman. I was a remainder in the EU referendum, and I have tried not to become a “remoaner,” which is what we heard from the Labour and Scottish National party spokespeople. Our proposal is simple: no public funds should be committed to the building of a new royal yacht. The will of the House is clear today that people do not have an appetite to recommission the existing royal yacht Britannia, but if we can find a way to privately fund a new royal yacht, it is something that the Government should seriously consider. I am encouraged that the Minister said that the Government would consider a cost-benefit analysis and that their minds are not closed.

The old royal yacht, which is in Leith docks, is something in which our nation can still take huge pride. It is the most popular tourist attraction in Scotland, and we have heard today that it should remain as a beacon for Edinburgh and Leith around the globe. This debate has received international attention, and I have been overwhelmed by requests for interviews from the German media. We need to understand that in Britain we do not appreciate the contribution that a royal yacht can make in a way that other countries would appreciate—they seem keen to see a new royal yacht rule the waves.

-Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).-
getting a handle on it requires detailed, relentless work over time. As soon as the Government close one loophole, people get around it. The world changes and the needs of the economy change. If we are to have an immigration system that delivers for the economy and the British people, that relentless, detailed work needs to continue.

When I was Immigration Minister, I found it very frustrating not to be able to control EU migration. We could control it a little—we could crack down on overt abuse—but it was largely outside the control of Ministers and of Parliament. That was very frustrating, and Brexit is an opportunity to get it right. It seemed to me in the referendum campaign that one of the important issues, although not the only one, that led to the vote to leave the European Union was that the British people were frustrated that free movement within the EU did not give their elected Government and their elected representatives the ability to control immigration and to choose who came to our country in the way they thought we should. I do not think that was the only issue, but it was clear from the general election campaign and from the referendum campaign that it is important and we need to address it.

As I said, the Conservative party made a clear commitment in both our last two manifestos to reduce net migration to sustainable levels, which is defined as reducing it from hundreds of thousands to tens of thousands. That ambition has been reconfirmed, post-referendum, by the Prime Minister. She has been realistic that it will take time to deliver—we are not likely to leave the European Union for another two years after article 50 has been triggered, and it will take time for the implementation of policies to take effect after that—but we can get on a path to delivering that target. That would be welcome, and I know the Minister would be keen to achieve it.

It is worth saying that this is not just about our manifesto commitment. The reason for reducing net migration is that, certainly at the lower end of the labour market, there is evidence that high levels of migration can have an impact on wage levels. That was one of the issues reflected in the British people’s decision to leave the European Union. Particularly in areas that have large numbers of new migrants, there can be significant pressures on public services, which we also heard about from the public: pressures on accessing doctors, other healthcare services, schools and housing. All those pressures would be alleviated if we controlled migration more effectively.

If no British citizens at all were out of work, clearly it would make sense to import workers from overseas to fill the skill gaps and the gaps in the labour market. However, although unemployment is very low—less than 5%, which is a success both of Government policy and of the work done over the years of the coalition Government, particularly by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr Duncan Smith), to make the benefits system more flexible and to encourage people to get into work, with changes such as universal credit—a significant number of British people who are capable of working and would like to work have some sort of barrier or difficulty that makes it harder to get a job.

I do not particularly want to fire statistics at the Minister, but it is worth looking at the number of people who claim employment and support allowance and are in the work-related activity group, which means they have a condition that will allow them to work at some point in the future. There are nearly half a million people in that category, half of whom are people with mental health conditions, for example, who would be able to work if they were given the opportunity to do so and their employer made reasonable adjustments. There are more than 1.5 million people in the support group; again, with reasonable adjustments, some of those people would be able to enter the workplace. I remind the Minister that many of those people would like to work. They want the opportunity to work, but they do not currently get it.

There are also significant numbers of people with a learning disability who would be capable of working and would love the opportunity to work but do not currently get it. It is worth mentioning some information that Mencap has provided for this debate. It points out that there are 1.4 million people in the United Kingdom with a learning disability. Mencap exists to support those people and their families. It estimates that around eight in every 10 of those 1.4 million people with a learning disability could do work, with the right support, but also that only two in every 10 of them are currently in employment. That means that, according to Mencap staff, who are experts on such matters, six in every 10 people with a learning disability—840,000 people—could do some sort of work but are not currently given the opportunity.

Mencap says that the majority of people with a learning disability can work and want to work. The figures are stark: the national employment percentage is in the high 70s, but the overall disability employment rate is just below 50%. Mencap makes the point that there is a large pool of people who are capable of working and would like the opportunity to work, but who are not currently given the opportunity to do so.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I was very much in the out camp and was pleased that the referendum went the way it did. My constituents asked me whether they would continue to be protected by disabilities legislation, as they are while we are in the EU. Is it the right hon. Gentleman’s intention that that legislative protection would still be given outside the EU? I understand the Government committed to that, so I am keen to hear whether that is the case. If it is, the existing protection in legislation will continue.

Mr Harper: I welcome that intervention because, although I am sure that the Minister will respond to that point, it gives me the opportunity to remind the House that it was a Conservative Government who in 1995 brought in the first Disability Discrimination Act, which was taken through the Commons by Lord Hague of Richmond, who was then simply William Hague and a Minister in the Department that became the Department for Work and Pensions. That was trailblazing legislation for this country, informed by the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, which Lord Hague had studied carefully. He had the full support of the then Prime Minister, John Major, in taking it through the House.
That legislation is largely domestic and was introduced by a Conservative Government. When the last Labour Government introduced the Equality Act 2010, which consolidated a lot of legislation in one place, we supported that. I was the Conservative Front-Bench spokesman at the time, and I would not anticipate any change—certainly no diminution—in the legislative protection for disabled people when we leave the European Union. I am sure that the Minister will confirm that.

Some people might be thinking, “Well, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made that point at a timely moment. All this legislative protection is in place, so what difference will leaving the European Union make?” I received a briefing note from the Papworth Trust, which is another excellent organisation that helps disabled people to get into work. I suggest businesses need to put more effort and imagination into hiring people. The Papworth Trust says:

“A major barrier for our customers”

—the disabled people whom it helps—

“is that employers often seek ‘ready-made’ employees who are proficient in their role with minimum training, support or cost to the employer.

The trust also highlights the fact that there are many good employers that go that extra mile.

My argument is that, post-Brexit, we can say to employers, “You’re not going to have the ability to hire people who are ready to drop straight into your company off the shelf. You are going to have to look harder at people who might require extra training or assistance. The Government should stand ready to help you, perhaps by dealing with the extra costs of hiring some of those disabled people, but you should look at them and give them the opportunity. They will repay you by being productive, valued and valuable employees.”

The Government can challenge employers on their attitudes. As I said, there are already some very good employers. The Government’s Disability Confident scheme helps to share best practice and gives employers the confidence to hire more disabled people. It is a very good example.

I have several asks to make of the Minister. First, he should continue the work that the Government are already doing in the Department for Work and Pensions, which is working closely with the Home Office on this matter. As I highlighted at the start of the debate, the fact that Ministers from both Departments are present and listening to the debate is excellent. I have had conversations with both the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions and the Home Secretary on this matter. They are both keen to make progress in this area.

Secondly, we need to identify the sectors of the economy in which we are currently very dependent on migration from the European Union. For both entry-level and skilled jobs, we should find out where people with a disability could provide a contribution to employers.

Thirdly, the Government need to work in partnership with employers, but also to utilise the third and charitable sectors. I have already mentioned several organisations, but Mind is a prominent mental health charity that encourages employers to employ people with a mental health problem. Scope and Mencap are both excellent organisations that continue to work in partnership with the Government and employers.

Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing this debate. I cannot agree with everything he has said about immigration but, on the disability employment gap, I have to concur with a lot of what he said. Will he encourage his colleagues in the Government to bring forward the Green Paper on the health and work programme so that some of the issues we are discussing can be teased out further?

Mr Harper: Part of the reason why I started to have some of the conversations I have been having and secured this debate was to inform the wider debate. I think the Government are planning to publish the Green Paper in the autumn. Part of the point of discussing these subjects is to feed into the strands of thinking that will go into the Green Paper, which is of course a consultation document. As the Government listen to responses from employers, Members of Parliament and the charitable sector, they can include this debate as one thing they think about as they formulate the specific plans that will be published in a White Paper and perhaps, if required, in legislation.

The final thing I want to say to the Minister is that he should look at Access to Work. That legislation is largely domestic and was introduced by a Conservative Government. When the last Labour Government introduced the Equality Act 2010, which consolidated a lot of legislation in one place, we supported that. I was the Conservative Front-Bench spokesman at the time, and I would not anticipate any change—certainly no diminution—in the legislative protection for disabled people when we leave the European Union. I am sure that the Minister will confirm that.

In summary, the Minister should work closely with other Departments across Government, which is already happening but must continue; he should look at the Green Paper that the Government are going to publish and the feedback from it, and build in the ideas I have outlined; and he should look at the help that the Government already provide to employers to check that it is going to deliver in the new environment. If we do that and get that imagination and effort from employers, with support from Government, one thing that will flow from Brexit will be further opportunities for disabled people to get into work. To use the phrase of the moment, we can then truly build a country that works for everyone.

4.18 pm

The Minister for Immigration (Mr Robert Goodwill): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I commend my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean (Mr Harper) on securing the debate, on his eloquent contribution and on his article on this very subject in today’s Times newspaper. As both a former Minister for Disabled People and a former
distinguished holder of the post that I now occupy, he brings unique knowledge and experience to the debate. Indeed, there was very little in what he said with which I could disagree. I welcome the fact that the Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work was present for my right hon. Friend’s contribution, which shows that we work across Government on such matters.

One issue that my right hon. Friend raised was the help and support that can be given to employers on the hiring of people with disabilities. I would also like to talk about people with abilities; we have talked a lot about disability, but the abilities that people have are a tremendous resource, although in many ways it goes untapped. Our small employer offer now gives advice and financial support to small and medium-sized enterprises, and further ideas will be explored in the forthcoming work and health Green Paper, which he referred to.

I will discuss my current area of responsibility shortly, but first I will mention the real advances that this Government have made in employment and disability employment. In the past six years, we have overseen huge increases in the number of 16 to 64-year-olds in employment. Since May 2010, employment has risen by 2.3 million, with 74.5% of people of working age now in employment. That is a testament to our record of helping nearly a million new businesses to set up and grow, and of creating nearly 3 million new apprenticeships. We have also taken the lowest-paid workers out of income tax and introduced a new national living wage to help sustain the labour market. In addition, during the past three years the number of disabled people in work has increased by almost half a million. A total of 3.4 million disabled people are now in the workforce.

However, there is much more to do. The labour force survey from 2015 tells us that 11% of disabled people of working age have never worked, compared with 8% of non-disabled people. There are also important differences in the highest educational qualifications of working-age disabled and non-disabled people, which may affect the employment opportunities and income of each group. Also, while the rate of employment for those of working age is at 74.5% overall, it is at 47.9% for disabled people.

We recognise that the gap between the employment rates of disabled people and non-disabled people remains too large, which is why we are committed to halving it. This Government are ambitious for disabled people and people with health conditions, and we want to remove the barriers that prevent them from working. We want every individual to have the opportunity to share in the economic and health benefits that work brings.

The Government’s ambition to halve the disability employment gap has been widely recognised as being bold and challenging. The gap has persisted over time, under successive Governments, and is the result of a complex blend of factors. We plan to publish the Green Paper that I have referred to shortly. It will explore a range of ways to improve the prospects and transform the lives of disabled people and people with long-term health conditions. We want to remove the barriers that prevent them from working, and help to ensure that they are able to obtain work and remain in it.

Neil Gray: We look forward to the publication of the Green Paper, but will the Government commit to putting forward any extra resources? A number of the areas that the Green Paper would seek to address, including helping people with learning disabilities or mental health conditions, would require a bespoke intervention and a bespoke service, which is obviously expensive. Is it possible for the Government to commit more funding to what will be proposed in the Green Paper?

Mr Goodwill: Of course, a review of resourcing will be part of the review, but let us not forget that getting people into work means that they will be less reliant on benefits and more able to contribute, not only to their own lives but to the economy through the tax they will pay.

By the end of this Parliament, we want to have shown that there are interventions that can meaningfully address the pay gap, and to be on the way to securing success. Addressing the gap is partly about ensuring that employers do all they can to fill jobs with people in the resident labour market, including disabled people.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): I apologise for arriving late for the debate, Mr Owen. Does the Minister agree that we should actually be quite optimistic, given that employers report above average levels of commitment and loyalty from their existing disabled workers? That is a good story to get over to employers.

Mr Goodwill: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. This process is about sharing the experiences of employers who have managed to deliver on this issue, to show that it is not something that employers should be frightened of. Rather, it is a real opportunity for their business that they should grasp with both hands.

Although nine out of 10 people employed here are UK nationals, we want to reduce the reliance on international workers, as part of our manifesto commitment to reduce net migration to sustainable levels, which means in the tens of thousands and not the hundreds of thousands. Working with colleagues across Government, I am determined to deliver on that commitment.

We have legislated twice to stop illegal migrants from operating under the radar, but there is no doubt that there is still far more that we can do. In March, we announced a package of measures to reform the routes for skilled workers, to ensure that only those who can make a real economic contribution can come to the UK. We are setting higher salary thresholds and introducing an immigration skills charge of £1,000 per worker per year, to boost funding for the training of UK workers. My right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean referred to the pressure on wage rates from immigration, and that change will help to address that problem. Nevertheless, there is more we can do to ensure that we continue to attract the brightest and best, while also ensuring that we clamp down on abuse and create opportunities for resident workers and disabled people.

As my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced last week, we will shortly consult on potential reform to our work and study migration systems. We will look very carefully at the work routes, including examining whether we should tighten up the test that companies have to take before recruiting from abroad.
We will do all we can to encourage employers to offer jobs to resident labour, including, of course, disabled people. We will consult on plans to ask any company seeking to sponsor a visa to bring in a non-EU worker to provide details of the proportion of work visa holders in their workforce, alongside other information used to support the visa application process. That already happens in the United States and is one of several proposals that we will consult on as part of our work to ensure that companies take reasonable steps to recruit at home before looking to bring in workers from abroad.

As with other information used in the visa process, that work would not involve, and was never intended to involve, the publication of the ratio of resident workers to foreign workers, nor the creation of lists or names of workers. We are considering adding other conditions that must be met before a company can recruit from abroad—for example, considering what steps they have taken to train up a local workforce. We are committed to reducing non-EU migration across all visa routes, to bring net migration down to sustainable levels as soon as possible.

British businesses have driven the economic recovery in this country, with employment now at record levels. However, we still need to do more, so that all British people, including disabled people, get the right opportunities they need to get on in life. What is happening now is not fair on the companies doing the right thing, so I will consider again whether our immigration system provides the right incentives for businesses to invest in resident workers.

I turn to the referendum on the UK’s membership of the European Union, about which my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean spoke in some detail. Like him, I was on the remain side of the argument, but I accept the wishes of the British people as expressed at the ballot box. As the Prime Minister has made clear, Brexit means Brexit, and we will make a success of it. The Prime Minister has announced that we will trigger article 50 by next March. Beyond that, however, she has rightly been clear that we should not provide a running commentary on events, and it would not be right for me to set out the terms of our negotiations here, even if I was aware of all of them. What I will say is that, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Forest of Dean suggested, leaving the European Union presents us with an opportunity to look afresh at all the issues around free movement.

Currently, nationals from countries in the European economic area have the right in EU law to enter the UK for any purpose for up to three months, and to stay indefinitely to work. They can access services and employment on the basis of their EU passport or identity card. Free movement rights are exercised at the discretion of the EEA national, rather than with the permission of the destination member state. Since 2004, free movement from the A8—the eight accession countries—and from the A2 countries, Bulgaria and Romania, has provided employers with a readily available pool of cheap labour. That has had a significant impact on employment practices, so any restrictions would clearly have an impact.

EU nationals, excluding Irish nationals, account for almost 6% of total UK employment, but they are over-represented in sectors such as hospitality, manufacturing, agriculture, transport and storage. It is in that context that we can look again at prioritising employment for the resident labour market, including disabled people. We should look at where disabled people are able to provide a contribution, while ensuring that the right safeguards are put in place, particularly if they do not have an advocate to work in their best interests. That will require close working across Government, but I assure my right hon. Friend that in order to address these issues I will work closely with my counterparts in his other former Department, the Department for Work and Pensions; with the voluntary sector, where appropriate; and, of course, with employers.

I assure my right hon. Friend that the position of the disabled is, and will remain, a priority for this Government in the months and years ahead. We will seize every opportunity to ensure that, wherever possible, those with disabilities are helped into the workforce.

Question put and agreed to.
HS2: North-west of England

Albert Owen (in the Chair): We now move to the next debate. From the outset, I want to make it clear that it is an hour-long debate and that I will call the three Front-Bench spokespersons, including the Minister, within half an hour. A number of Members are down to speak and I ask them to be concise. I am sure that the Member moving the motion will take interventions, if necessary, during his opening remarks.

4.30 pm

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered HS2 in the North West of England.

I am grateful for the opportunity to raise the question of High Speed 2 in the north-west of England, and it is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Owen.

Infrastructure investment should be a good thing for the economy, and in principle I am all in favour of HS2, and HS3, HS4, and HS5. But as things stand, and until assurances are given by the Government, I remain ambivalent that HS2 will truly bring the promised benefits to all of the UK. Indeed, if rumours, press stories and anonymous briefings are to be believed, it will simply be a fast link between the major centres of London, Birmingham and Manchester that will help to expand those three big cities while further squeezing out growth in the areas outside those metropolises. Therefore, the consideration must be about not just the physical layout of the line and its track works, but the services on it, and the line design must flow from the service level required, rather than the other way around.

I sound that element of caution because, as we have seen with HS2 phase one, once the project gets passed over to the Treasury, finance often becomes the only—and a short-term—consideration. For example, the HS2 spur to Heathrow Airport is lost, with warnings of further cuts. Indeed, we are still waiting for formal confirmation that HS2 will go ahead at all, which is one reason I always called for the whole project to be built from the north to the south, to ensure that it did not simply become yet another major infrastructure programme focused solely on London and the south-east. Worse than that would be the opportunity missed if the wrong strategy for HS2 in the north-west was adopted. The Government's own vision for HS2 in its consultation envisaged that only two trains per hour would stop at Crewe, with the majority of trains going into a tunnel just south of Crewe and bypassing the station, and therefore the region—my sub-region—completely.

In making my case, I am pleased to call in support two principal backers: Sir David Higgins, with his report “HS2 Plus”, and the board of the Cheshire and Warrington local enterprise partnership. Our LEP's economic strategy is based very clearly on the vision of Sir David Higgins of a hub at Crewe, interlinked with local lines and distributing the growth benefits across our sub-region. Sir David’s report demonstrates that Crewe sits at the very centre of the north-west rail system, and states very clearly that Crewe should therefore become a regional transport hub, with HS2 fully integrated into plans for revitalising the northern economy as a whole. Rail lines from Crewe radiate towards Manchester and Liverpool, Stoke and Derby, and Warrington, and on to Lancashire and Scotland, Shrewsbury and mid-Wales, and many of the smaller towns in Cheshire, as well as Chester and north Wales and the Wirral. A proper regional rail hub at Crewe would allow all of those places to enjoy the benefits of the huge investment that the nation is making in the new line.

From the work undertaken by my LEP, the main conclusion is clear: a proper regional hub at Crewe could extend the benefits of HS2 to 1.5 million people across the north-west and north Wales, reducing travel time to London by an hour. Those figures come from modelling work done by Mott MacDonald, commissioned by the LEP. The firm was asked to assume that five trains per hour from London stop at Crewe, with up to four trains an hour then running from Crewe on all the lines that radiate out from there. In some cases, perhaps because there are single track sections on the line, that would not be possible, so the LEP asked Mott MacDonald to limit the number of additional trains to what the current infrastructure can accommodate.

My own local authority, Cheshire West and Chester, working with neighbouring authorities in the Mersey Dee Alliance area, which includes councils across the border in north Wales, has also identified the importance of rail infrastructure as central to the economic growth of our region. “Growth Track 360”, a report published by that alliance of businesses and political and public sector leaders, led by Samantha Dixon, the leader of Cheshire West and Chester council, has set out a programme of rail improvements that will transform the economies of Cheshire and north Wales by providing better links between places in Cheshire and the Wirral and into north Wales. By linking such improvements into the services radiating out from a proper rail hub at Crewe, we can offer even more people in Cheshire, north Wales and Merseyside the benefits of the journey time improvements that HS2 provides.

“Growth Track 360” also calls for developments at Crewe to be future-proofed, to ensure that in the long term HS2 trains have the ability to “turn left at Crewe”, as we say, towards Chester and on to north Wales. If that does not happen, 1.5 million people will be on a branch line and the full benefits of HS2 will be lost. Surely those areas also have a right to benefit from public investment in HS2? But, just as importantly, they have the right not to suffer from—to coin a phrase used on the railways—the wrong type of HS2.

I am clear that if we do not get the Higgins vision of a rail hub, investment and growth will be sucked out of and away from Cheshire and other parts of the north-west in favour of the already big cities. I do not want Cheshire's growth to depend on crumbs from the table of Manchester. Employers in my area already tell me that they lose skilled workers to Manchester because the local rail links to Manchester and the local and regional motorway network—yes, I am talking about the M56—are insufficient. If the strategic rail network also fails to serve the entire region, the negative effects could be catastrophic and long term.

My LEP has drawn some interesting and valuable comparisons with the effect of high-speed rail connectivity in similar circumstances elsewhere. Lyon was the first city to be connected to the TGV network in France. It now handles more than 100,000 passengers a day more than when it was opened, and it has led to the creation of skilled workers to Manchester because the local rail links to Manchester and the local and regional motorway network—yes, I am talking about the M56—are insufficient. If the strategic rail network also fails to serve the entire region, the negative effects could be catastrophic and long term.

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of 40,000 new jobs in the area around the station. Lille is a city about the same size as Warrington. In the eight years after its TGV station was opened, employment in the city and the surrounding region grew by nearly 120,000. Key to that success was the creation of a strong local network of trains, trams and buses linking to the TGV network at Lille station, much like the regional rail hub Sir David Higgins proposed for Crewe.

Kakegawa is a similar-sized city to Chester. It was originally bypassed by the Japanese high-speed rail network. It finally got a new station in 1988, leading directly to an almost 40% increase in industrial output in the town in just four years.

So, in the debate and more generally, we now await the Government’s proposals for HS2 phase two. I am grateful for the Transport Minister’s attendance today and even more grateful that it is he and not one of his colleagues from the Treasury who will respond. Clearly, one of the big concerns of HS2 is cost, and we cannot write blank cheques, but if we can consider HS2 as an investment that will benefit the whole country, hopefully we can arrive at a solution that spreads its wealth across the whole country too. Central to that is the Higgins hub at Crewe with its five or six trains an hour and through services connecting HS2 to all the major towns and cities in the north-west and on to Birmingham and London.

In conclusion, we have a choice: we can take Harry Beck’s plan of the London underground, draw a short line above Chesham and Amersham showing Birmingham and Manchester, and consider HS2 to be just another part of London’s transport network, or we can recognise that a truly national project should have truly national benefits. I suggest to the Minister that now would be a great time for the Government to confirm that their intention is the latter.

Albert Owen (in the Chair): I have just sought clarification about the wind-ups. The Labour and Scottish National parties have five minutes each, not 10, to wind up, and the Minister has 10 minutes to respond to the debate.

4.38 pm

Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to take part in the debate. I agree with much of what the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) said. HS2 has the potential to bring huge benefits to my constituency if the appropriate system of hub and spoke is in place. Winsford in particular could benefit from that development, as it is on the line that runs to Chester. However, I urge caution to the Minister on routing through my constituency.

Eddisbury is geologically unique. It has a salt mine that provides 60% of the salt that keeps our roads clear and the neighbouring constituency has underground gas storage for the UK’s gas reserves. The whole area is riddled with wild and mined brine extraction with large areas of wet rockhead, where water causes the salt to dissolve, which results in subsidence problems and continuously shifting ground.

If the money is to be spent, it needs to be spent properly and needs to ensure those five or six trains to Crewe and a link to Manchester airport in order to deliver for the region. The Minister will shortly receive further information in the form of an expert report, which will highlight some of the engineering issues that will be faced on the route currently proposed through Eddisbury. At present, HS2 has no baseline figures in terms of subsidence. It is not undertaking ground movement assessments in the area using the most up-to-date InSAR satellite imaging technology. If the Government are not to incur vastly increased costs, it is vital that a baseline is established and that ongoing ground movement monitoring is carried out in order to understand the seismicity of the area and its vulnerabilities.

In terms of supporting the line itself, 100-metre-deep pilings might be needed, running through salt. That would be a unique engineering project for Eddisbury’s particular geology. I would urge the Minister to cost that section of the route carefully and examine, with the very strict Treasury criteria, whether value could be achieved by aligning the route elsewhere, which might deliver a better outcome for Cheshire as a whole as well as deliver the kind of economic benefits that the local enterprise partnership has talked about.

I know time is short and I want to move on to compensation for my residents. At the moment, the announcement on phase 2b of HS2 has been considerably delayed. That has substantially disadvantaged residents, who are currently only able to access compensation through the exceptional hardship scheme, rather than the need-to-sell scheme. The need-to-sell scheme only requires applicants to show unreasonable burden. It is not fair for residents on phase 2b to have a less fair scheme when it is no fault of their own that the route announcement has been delayed. Is the Minister prepared to say today that the need-to-sell scheme could be extended to those residents of Eddisbury affected by the route issues?

HS2 could bring huge benefits, but it has to bring those benefits in a way that includes a proper cost-benefit analysis. Where the evidence shows that the routing may not be appropriate and accurate, the arguments made by the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) for appropriate stops locally at Crewe, and the establishment of the hub-and-spoke system and proper investment for the station, can only be done if consideration is given to where savings can be made on the route on the Treasury costings. In the meantime, some of my residents are affected by blight. Bearing in mind that those residents are relatively small in number at present, I would ask that the Government consider extending the need-to-sell scheme to them immediately. There is much more I could say, but I shall write to the Minister to outline my further arguments.

4.43 pm

Jonathan Reynolds (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I have always been a supporter of greater investment in our railway network and, as someone who was on the HS2 Bill Committee, examining the Bill line-by-line, I remain convinced that bringing high-speed rail to the UK is essential. Therefore, it is a pleasure to be in this debate under your chairmanship today, Mr Owen.

We have got to secure greater capacity on our railway network—it really is as simple as that. Demand on our railways has exploded over recent years. Total passenger journeys have more than doubled—from 735 million in 2005 to 1.5 billion journeys in 2013. By 2026, peak demand is projected to hit 250% of capacity at Euston, 200% of capacity at Birmingham New Street and 175% of capacity at Manchester Piccadilly. The west coast main
line will be full by 2024. During morning peak-time services, around 3,000 passengers arrive standing into London Euston or Birmingham each day, unable to get a seat despite paying the full fare. These are journeys not of 10 or 20 minutes but of up to two hours or more from Manchester. My wife once had to sit on the floor outside the toilet from London to Manchester when she was eight months pregnant, with a small toddler in tow—

Jonathan Reynolds: I believe many people have experienced similar problems on the network. This is not what should be offered by a 21st century rail service in the fifth richest country in the world.

The increase in capacity offered by HS2 is warmly welcomed. I recognise that we should be open to conversations about how we might change the design, and different parts of the country will need to put their case for how they see or want to see the benefits manifest themselves in their areas. I myself wanted HS2 to begin construction in the north, from Manchester heading down. Many colleagues have made that case. A compelling case was made by my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) on how it could be altered to improve the service for his area. It is important to say that the phase 1 plans in the hybrid Bill will be quite transformative, because separating out long-distance passenger traffic from freight and local services will allow more services across the board. When we talk about HS2, that should always be borne in mind—the benefits are not just from the new capacity of the HS2 line, but also from the additional benefits that come from freeing up the existing capacity and infrastructure.

I find the two most common complaints I hear about HS2 to be without foundation. The first is that HS2 will simply be a rich man’s railway. That is incoherent. The laws of supply and demand tell us that, if we do not build more capacity, prices will have to rise as an ever greater number of people chase a limited number of seats on the trains. I see HS2 being built as a way to keep fares down.

The second criticism that we often hear is that the new line should be built not with high-speed technology but with standard technology. Again, that does not add up. A new rail line built to traditional speeds would still incur about 90% of the costs of HS2 but offer only a fraction of the capacity that HS2 would provide. I believe this is the right project.

If we really want to make real the Government’s former rhetoric—I do not know whether it is still the policy—about the northern powerhouse and devolution, infrastructure and investment outside of London has got to come with it. We cannot attract the global companies and the long-term investment into the north-west and Yorkshire that we all want to see unless we can give people some certainty that we will address the chronic underinvestment in infrastructure in the regions outside London. I see HS2 as integral to that. It is about jobs, growth and connectivity, about better wages, better career paths and better homes. It is about bringing London and Manchester closer together and giving hard-pressed Londoners a chance to spend more time in the UK’s greatest city. The HS2 stations at Manchester airport and Manchester city centre are about making Greater Manchester a nexus for domestic, European and global travel, and I like the look of that a great deal.

Jason McCartney: I rise as a Yorkshire Member. This is relevant. I thank the hon. Gentleman for talking about capacity. It is not about speed. Does he agree that, at a time when the Government are making big infrastructure decisions on Hinkley, Crossrail and airport expansion, it is really important that we win the hearts and minds in the north of England, by showing that this will not only benefit Leeds and Manchester? It will also benefit our towns—Chester, Stalybridge, Huddersfield, Halifax and Burnley—and it will create quality jobs and apprenticeships in the north of our nation.

Jonathan Reynolds: I endorse that wholeheartedly, and not just because we share a train line between our constituencies, allowing easy access between the two. This is about how the economy works outside of London and where the investment goes. It is about job opportunities, career paths and the lives that can radiate from that kind of investment.

We have never got this right as a country before. We never thought as we needed to about what to do when we saw the de-industrialisation of the ’80s and the changes in the way that people live and work in the areas those of us here represent. It needs this kind of ambition. People talk about the costs of these projects, but they always will be expensive in a country with our land values and distribution of population. It will be difficult, in cost terms, to deliver, but it is the right thing to do.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that the north of England has suffered because 90% of capital expenditure on transport has gone to the south-east? To put his point very bluntly, should we not ensure that HS2 all the way to Leeds and Manchester is not behind Crossrail 2 in the queue for capital investment?

Jonathan Reynolds: Unsurprisingly, I entirely endorse that message. This has to be the priority for the country, because it is a national project. Other very useful transport infrastructure projects do not have the same benefits for the whole of the country. When talking about projects of this kind, we, and the Front Benchers in particular, have got to scrutinise the costs. We have got to ensure that the powers and resources to deliver the projects are proportionate and that the people who are affected by the building of the line are taken into consideration. Above all, we have to be unequivocal that this country needs to make this kind of investment if we are to make our economy work better and improve our constituents’ lives and career paths. I welcome every opportunity to debate this project, but we must always talk about improving it and about the rightness of making this kind of infrastructure investment, because that is what our constituencies need and our constituents want.

Several hon. Members rose—

Albert Owen (in the Chair): Order. Three Members have indicated that they want to speak. If they take five minutes each, that would be great.
Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con): Will my hon. Friend endorse the North Wales and Mersey Dee Rail Task Force growth track 360 campaign, which seeks to ensure journey times of under one hour within the north Wales, Cheshire and Wirral region, as well as faster links to London, to counteract the economic underperformance of the region by connecting people to jobs and business to customers, and reducing our overdependence on a congested road network?

Graham Evans: I absolutely agree. My hon. Friend raises an important point. High Speed 2 is not just about Cheshire and the north-west region. It is about another country and the north Wales economy. He is exactly right. The Mersey Dee Alliance is a good alliance, and I am very pleased, as he is, to be part of it. It is about looking at this together, because enterprise zones do not recognise borders, and those of us representing Cheshire will benefit from the cross-border activity. It is very important that the rail infrastructure travels along north Wales and Anglesey to the markets of Ireland.

It would be a mistake to look at High Speed 2 as a stand-alone project. Over the next five years, three times the amount that is spent on High Speed 2 will be spent on roads, railways and other forms of transport. It is really important to ensure that High Speed 2 and the expenditure on other transport in the north-west complement each other so the connectivity that High Speed 2 brings is enhanced throughout the north-west, spreading the benefits. Trying to get from Northwich to Widnes and Runcorn is a nightmare. It is virtually impossible. Passengers trundle into Stockport, and then trundle along over to Widnes and into Liverpool. Increasing capacity on rail networks will potentially remove an estimated 10 million vehicles from UK roads, significantly relieving the pressure on busy sections of roads, such as the M56 in my constituency, which the hon. Member for City of Chester could not resist mentioning. We are all as one on the M56’s issues.

We have only to look at another French town, Lille, whose economy has flourished as a result of the connectivity of high-speed rail and the connection to the HS1 line, to see the potential that High Speed 2 can bring to north-west hubs such as Crewe. Those areas of France have been transformed. Around the station in Lille, investment has increased significantly, and new offices, hotels, a retail centre and a conference centre are all being developed. The Euralille complex, situated between the two Lille stations, has emerged as the third largest business centre in France. That highlights the real opportunity for Cheshire and its towns. Lille highlights how forward vision and connectivity together can be a radical catalyst for growth in any modern city.

Connectivity between our cities is vital for the development of the northern powerhouse and the rebalancing of our economy. North-west businesses will have better access to specialised services, a larger workforce and greater opportunities to offer their services to the capital. Likewise, shorter journey times are vital for business-related journeys, and connections with London alone could bring £4 billion of benefits to the north-west. Over the next few decades, High Speed 2 will play a fundamental role in reshaping our economy. Some 70% of jobs created by High Speed 2 are forecast to be outside London. I am sure all hon. Members will agree that we want those jobs in the north of England and Scotland.
[Graham Evans]

We must look at High Speed 2 not in isolation but as part of an overall strategy for improving connectivity throughout the north-west. We must take steps to ensure that spending on other areas of transport infrastructure is, as much as possible, complementary to the High Speed 2 network so we can replicate Lille’s success at hubs such as Crewe in the north-west of England.

Albert Owen (in the Chair): I hope that the trains are more on time than the hon. Gentleman’s five-minute speech.

4.59 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I praise my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) for securing this timely debate. I have the most visited constituency in the north-west of England—in fact, 25 million people have visited it in the past 12 months. Hon. Members have probably guessed that Manchester airport is on my southern boundary, but that makes the issue very relevant to us.

Daniel Adamson, a Mancunian entrepreneur and engineer, coined the term “northern powerhouse” in 1860 when he built the Manchester ship canal. He wanted to create a continuous economic region from the estuary of the Mersey to the banks of the Humber estuary. We are focusing on HS2 and its impact—an impact like the ship canal had more than a century ago.

HS2 will drive growth in the north, as other Members have said, and help free up capacity, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) said. The west coast main line will be full by 2024. We need the extra capacity, but we also need a station at Manchester airport. That will be critical to ensuring that the benefits of the project are felt beyond Manchester as a whole, in the wider catchment areas. Any measures that help to reduce journey times and free up capacity on the existing network, enabling more places across the north to be connected to Manchester airport, will be most welcome.

One of the most important features of HS2 and a station at Manchester airport is the potential for wider rail network improvements. A connected network would potentially deliver truly transformational benefits for the north. Connectivity to and from Manchester airport is a key factor for airlines when they think about introducing new long-haul routes. With the current rail access, 3.5 million people are within a two-hour catchment area of Manchester airport using public transport, compared with 11 million and 12 million for Gatwick and Heathrow respectively. Currently, the only city that can be reached by rail from Manchester airport in 30 minutes is Manchester. As my hon. Friend the Member for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) alluded to, that situation exists following decades of Governments of both parties spending 90% of infrastructure investment on the south and the south-east.

I mentioned the transformational nature of a connected network. The current journey time from Manchester airport to Euston is two hours and 24 minutes. That will be revolutionised; it will come down to 59 minutes. If we do this right, it will open up whole new markets, from Hull to Liverpool, Chester and north Wales.

Let us look at the growth of comparator European airports and cities. Amsterdam’s Schiphol airport has a smaller immediate population than Greater Manchester, yet successfully draws a higher proportion of its passengers from further afield. That is supported by rail journeys around 30% quicker than those between Manchester and the likes of Liverpool, Leeds and Sheffield. From Manchester airport, it currently takes 65 minutes to get to Liverpool and 73 minutes to get to Sheffield. If we introduced HS2 and HS3, those journeys would be reduced to 30 minutes. To get from Manchester airport to Leeds, it would take 10 minutes to get to Manchester city centre and another 30 minutes to get to Leeds—40 minutes in total. We would be linking three major airport hubs at Speke, Manchester and Leeds-Bradford, all for the cost of one Crossrail project—it would be the same length—and creating unheard-of runway capacity across the north.

We estimate that with the right rail improvements that opened up the catchment area and gave airlines access to more passenger demand, 20 to 30 new long-haul routes from Manchester airport would be made viable. I would like the Minister to respond to those points, and possibly pledge to follow through and ensure that the design and delivery of the HS2 project works hand in hand with the delivery of a true east-west link as part of wider rail network improvements, and that both schemes are delivered at the earliest possible opportunity so that we can derive maximum benefit and close the north-south productivity gap as soon as possible. We are focused on Heathrow—we will be for weeks, months and years ahead—but we will get more bang for our buck in GDP as a country and an economy by investing in our northern infrastructure than we ever will by investing in runway 3 at Heathrow.

Albert Owen (in the Chair): I call Mary Robinson to conclude the Back-Bench contributions. I will call the Scottish National party spokesman at 10 past 5 at the latest.

5.4 pm

Mary Robinson (Cheadle) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen, and to see Members from both sides of the Chamber present for this important debate about HS2. I congratulate the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) on securing it.

I am conscious of time, but I rise to speak about how this ambitious project will bring prosperity and jobs to my region, Greater Manchester. High Speed 2 will sweep into the north, with phase 2a to Crewe scheduled to open in 2027 and the delivery of phase 2b marked for completion in 2033. HS2 is the UK’s largest infrastructure project. It is critical to genuinely transforming connectivity across the region and rebalancing the UK economy. Now more than ever, I believe that it is vital that we modernise our railways.

I was pleased that the Minister was able to attend the debate that I secured in the previous Session on transport infrastructure in south Manchester. Although I was unable to dedicate as much time in that debate to high-speed rail as it was due, I welcomed the fact that he noted the importance of a regional hub at Manchester airport. The HS2 station at Manchester airport will reach close to my constituency of Cheadle and offer substantial further scope for jobs and productivity growth.
It will maximise the airport’s potential and recognise its capacity to grow and handle up to 55 million passengers per annum. Manchester airport employs 20,000 people, many of whom live in my constituency, and contributes £1.8 billion annually to the economy. The £1 billion transformation plan to develop the airport through the airport city enterprise zone promises more jobs and wealth creation. That hub is vital to supporting development and key to regional prosperity and delivering the northern powerhouse.

One of the most important features of HS2, with a station at Manchester airport, is the potential for it to form part of a wider northern powerhouse rail network, as the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) mentioned. Such a connected network has the potential to deliver truly transformational benefits for the north. With the current rail access to Manchester airport, the population within a two-hour catchment area using public transport stands at only around 3.5 million, compared with 11 million and 12 million at Gatwick and Heathrow respectively. Manchester is the only city that can be reached by rail in 30 minutes. It is critical that we get the Manchester airport hub and that the design and delivery of HS2 works hand in hand with the design and delivery of a true east-west link across the north as part of the wider NPR network. Both schemes should be delivered at the earliest opportunity, so that we can derive the maximum benefit and close the north-south productivity gap.

I look forward to the legislation for phase 1 being brought forward later this year. Although I appreciate that delivery timetables have been extended to allow time for the petitions process, I urge the Government to take steps to prevent further delays to the opening of the first step of HS2. We need to talk not about whether HS2 will bring economic benefits, but about how great those benefits will be and how that investment can be spread across the north-west so that the benefits of a transformed rail network can be shared by everyone.

5.8 pm

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I congratulate the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) on securing the debate. My job of summing up for the SNP may have been slightly easier if the motion did not say “north-west of England” but stopped at just “north-west”. I noted that the hon. Member for Weaver Vale (Graham Evans) said that he agreed with every word that the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) had said. That may be a first, and it says a lot about the quality of the debate.

I agree that HS2 should be not just about connecting London, Birmingham and Manchester. It must be much more strategic than that. We have heard about east-west connectivity, and the hon. Member for City of Chester mentioned connectivity onwards north to Scotland, which must happen. There has been a bit of a theme among all the contributions: the economic benefits that arise from the expenditure on this big project, not just the cost burden, must be spread across the whole of the UK.

The call for a hub at Crewe makes absolute sense. That seems critical to connectivity between the regions and nations of the UK. I also agree that the project must be future-proof. I am concerned that under the current HS2 arrangements the classic compatible trains that will be purchased to run on the network will not actually run slower on the west coast main line north of Crewe than trains do at present. People will get to Crewe having had a quicker journey time, but then the service north of there will be diminished. That is not acceptable, so I ask the Minister to think about that in the long run.

To pick up on some of the other contributions, the hon. Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach) almost seemed to make the case against the project, which I found quite surprising, talking about the costs and engineering difficulties. I think there was a wee bit of “not in my back yard” and “we’ll take the benefits, but please build the railway somewhere else.”

Like the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde, I was on the High Speed Rail (London - West Midlands) Bill Committee, and I agree with him that HS2 is about capacity. The hon. Member for Colne Valley (Jason McCartney) said in an intervention that it is about not speed but capacity, but in my opinion it is about both. If we do not have the right speed, the attraction for passengers will not be there, especially when we look at extending the network north to Scotland. We have aspirations of a three-hour journey time from London, which would really compete with the budget airlines.

I have already said that the hon. Member for Weaver Vale agreed with every word said by the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde, which was good. The hon. Members for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) and for Cheadle (Mary Robinson) made clear the need for Manchester to be properly connected, with the benefits that it will bring, and the need for the east-west spur.

I apologise for repeating myself, but HS2 must be strategic and connect the entire country. Plans must be taken forward to bring the high-speed network north to Scotland. The hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde said he hoped that the project would start in the north, and he used Manchester as his example of the north. Actually, “north” is further north than Manchester. However, I agree with the sentiment: it would be great to start construction in the north—not north of Manchester, perhaps in Glasgow, and bring it right down from there, with the economic benefits being shared by all.

5.11 pm

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) for securing the debate. He passionately put forward his case on how HS2 can serve the interests of his constituents and the wider north-west. I echo his sentiment that HS2 has Labour’s backing. We welcome infrastructure investment, but part of the case for HS2 that convinced so many was that it was not simply another project designed for the benefit of the south-east but that it would benefit regions across the country.

Crewe is already a gateway station for the north-west, with regional and long-distance connections to the wider north-west, the east midlands and Wales, but there are significant capacity constraints that have an impact on reliability, which has been below industry targets, and there are bottlenecks at Colwich junction and around Stafford. This is also a problem for national freight
operators, with much freight traffic on the west coast main line routed through Basford Hall yard, south of Crewe, and 43% of rail freight journeys using the west coast main line at some point.

The phase 2a link will help provide much needed additional capacity for freight and will improve reliability for commuter services, so it should be welcomed that the Government have brought forward the opening of the phase 2a link to 2027 as that will provide benefits to the north-west and beyond. However, it would be disappointing if a Crewe hub were not developed, as the fact that it is already a regional hub provides a springboard for further developing and improving connectivity with conventional rail. The benefits of stopping more trains at Crewe are clear, as expressed in David Higgins’s “HS2 Plus” report.

We welcomed the Government’s decision to accelerate the section of route from the west midlands to Crewe so that it opens six years earlier than planned in 2027, bringing benefits to the north sooner than initially thought, but the primary concerns are the rumours that phases 2a and 2b might be downgraded or delayed as the project increasingly comes under budgetary strain.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones) indicated dissent.

Andy McDonald: I see the Minister shaking his head—he can give me that assurance, then. In the words of the Public Accounts Committee report, “the cost estimates for phase 2 are still volatile”.

There was a cost estimate from the Department for Transport that was £7 billion over the agreed £28.5 billion funding, and then £9 billion of potential savings were subsequently identified. We know that much of the savings are a result of more detailed and accurate estimates being applied, but the worry is that without a confirmed route and a firm cost estimate, and with budgetary pressures, the planned savings on phase 2 will be delivered by adversely affecting the expected benefits of the programme to the north, including the north-west.

I know the Minister will wish to reassure the House that he intends to preserve the integrity of HS2 to the north, because that will tackle the lack of capacity south of Birmingham and the poor connectivity not just between the region and London but within the north. It is crucial that we ensure that HS2 remains an infrastructure project that delivers for the whole country.

We have seen the uncertainty surrounding the proposed route changes in south Yorkshire. We do not want to see the same uncertainty on the western leg. It has been rumoured that if costs for the existing scheme cannot be brought down, one option under consideration is to delay or abandon altogether the section to Manchester and build the line only as far as Crewe, or to delay the line—an HS2 spokesperson said that the Treasury is taking the position that that nothing is ruled out.

I echo the concerns of my hon. Friend the Member for City of Chester and stress the importance of delivering a hub station at Crewe, which will benefit the sub-region, the north-west and the country as a whole, and of phase 2b, which ought to transform connectivity in the north and through the country. It would be disastrous for the north-west and make a mockery of the so-called northern powerhouse if phase 2 were to be downgraded.

We eagerly await the Government’s proposals for HS2 phase 2, but whatever the forthcoming route proposals, they must ensure that HS2 is an infrastructure project that delivers for the whole country. I hope the Minister can provide reassurances to that effect.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Owen. I congratulate the hon. Member for City of Chester (Christian Matheson) on securing this debate on HS2 connectivity in the north-west. He represents a beautiful city—one of the many places in the north-west that really stands to benefit from HS2. It has been great to hear the appetite for the scheme from across the Chamber.

HS2 will become the backbone of our national rail network. It will be a key part of building a transport system and economy that works for all. It will increase rail capacity and improve connectivity, and people will not need to travel on HS2 to benefit from it. By providing new fast lines for inter-city services, HS2 will free up space on our existing railway network for new commuter, regional and freight services. We are already starting to see the benefits of the scheme in the form of jobs and skills, which are being created now.

HS2 is working with businesses across the UK, including many small and medium-sized firms, to ensure that they are well prepared to bid for contracts and reap its benefits. Construction alone will generate about 25,000 jobs and 2,000 apprenticeships. A supplier roadshow has travelled the UK, highlighting the range of commercial opportunities that the construction schemes will present, encouraging companies from all over the UK to consider tendering for some of the work. I attended the last one, which was up in Aberdeen, which highlighted to the engineering businesses in the area who have perhaps developed great skills through the oil sector that HS2 presents opportunities for them.

HS2 is not just about serving a few destinations—that phrase was heard across the House. It is not just that; HS2 services will also run on to the existing network, serving destinations in the north-west and indeed those going as far as Scotland. Interchange with conventional rail will also be key in allowing places far beyond the network to benefit. Last year we decided to take the HS2 route via Crewe and to open the route to Crewe in 2027. The journey time between Crewe and London will be just 55 minutes—that is 35 minutes faster than today. Passengers interchanging at Crewe, for example from Chester or north Wales, will also be able to take advantage.

Sir David Higgins recognised the opportunity that Crewe presents for the region. He recommended a north-west hub at Crewe to integrate regional and high-speed rail. It is a sensible idea: Crewe already is a hub. It has rail services to London, Birmingham, Shrewsbury, south Wales, Stoke, Derby, Manchester, Liverpool, Scotland and, of course, north Wales and Chester. It is also well connected to major A roads and the M6.

The Government are developing options for Crewe and we expect to provide an update on the scheme later this year as part of our planned announcement on
and there are priorities for investment across the network. The hon. Member for City of Chester has clearly put across the local ambition for high-frequency HS2 services at Crewe and for the increased frequency of conventional services between Crewe and Chester. I understand that local ambition. I have made the case for my own constituency as well, as indeed have many hon. Members. We are already investing in connectivity in the region, and we only have to look at the working taking place at the Halton curve to see that. We are looking at what HS2 connectivity could be provided at Crewe to benefit the whole region.

I have to say that it is too early to lock down the service proposition at this stage. We need to understand what is possible and what benefits could be delivered, but options need to be left open so that services meet the demands and priorities of the 2020s and beyond. I also have to say that we have to think about affordability. We have incredibly ambitious rail investment programmes and there are priorities for investment across the network.

Christian Matheson: Does the Minister accept that the opportunities for the 2020s and beyond will actually be created by getting the service level for HS2 right?

Andrew Jones: I have absolutely no doubt that when we consider those services we are all thinking ahead. I entirely buy the argument that transport investment is a driver of economic growth and, indeed, social progress—whichever mode of transport we are talking about. The Government are not buying trains because we like trains; we are buying them because they facilitate economic growth. That is the same with buses and social progress.

Taking HS2 to Crewe will play an important part in turning the town around. It is already a hub and it is also a town that is in need of investment, but HS2 is not a silver bullet in itself. We need to ensure that HS2 drives regeneration, not only in the places that it serves directly but far more widely. For the economic growth benefits of HS2 to be realised and to spread, local partners have an important role to play.

It is fantastic to see the north-west making such excellent progress in its plans for the region. The northern gateway partnership is already developing its growth strategy. That work, which is aiming to deliver around 100,000 homes and 120,000 jobs, will ensure the regeneration benefits of HS2 are felt right across the region. I have met with the combined authority, Transport for Greater Manchester, on a number of occasions, and I have done the same with the west midlands. It has been fantastic to see the ambition that those areas have for regeneration, recognising that, when HS2 arrives, it will present them with significant opportunities.

Andy McDonald: The Minister said it is too early to “lock down” the level of service, but he will undoubtedly appreciate that, if we cannot establish a bare minimum level of service, this becomes a rather pointless and redundant exercise. If he is not able to do that now, will he give some indication of when he will be able to give a little bit more detail about the basic minimum level of service we have been discussing this afternoon?

Andrew Jones: I will come on to timing a little later on. I turn to the matter of the north Wales main line and the work that is being carried out by the North Wales and Mersey Dee rail task force. I welcome its establishment and it is doing a good job of making the case for rail modernisation in north Wales and of developing wider growth plans for the region. This is an opportunity for north Wales to make the best case for investment in rail infrastructure and services. It is vital that a shared local vision is brought together with a defined set of prioritised outcomes based on economic growth, journey times, connectivity and modal shift. We will continue to work closely with that taskforce and with the Welsh Government to provide advice and assistance and to consider what can be jointly accomplished. We want the taskforce to advise us effectively on options for enhancements, including electrification, to address the regional economic needs and, of course, on the value of those options.

Many hon. Members have commented today. I will first respond to my hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury (Antoinette Sandbach), who has raised concerns with me previously regarding the route north of Crewe, given the ground instability problems associated with the route crossing the Cheshire saltfield. I have been down that salt mine as part of looking at the winter preparations for the road network last year. I have to say it was a very interesting place to visit. I am aware of the scale of this enormous undertaking and I reassure my hon. Friend and other hon. Members that we are not ignoring that risk. HS2 Ltd has carried out surveys to better understand the geological issues in Cheshire and has commissioned further studies from third-party organisations. We are looking at a range of options in that area.

At this stage, I cannot provide any further information about where that part of the route will run. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will make an announcement on that during the autumn. My hon. Friend the Member for Eddisbury also made a further point about blight for residents affected by the potential routes. I will look at those cases with every sympathy, and I know she will write to me so I will look out for her letter.

I thoroughly agree with the points made by the hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) on transport being a driver of economic growth, on how capacity is necessary and on how, looking not too far ahead, we will have a rail network that is full, which is something we have discussed previously. He will not be surprised that we are in further agreement. To my hon. Friend the Member for Weaver Vale (Graham Evans), I say this is not a white elephant: it is a scheme that is a fundamental and critical part of our national infrastructure and it will happen.

To my hon. Friend the Member for Cheadle (Mary Robinson), I say yes, the debate really has moved on; it is not if but when this happens. The debate we should be having is on how we maximise the benefits that will flow from HS2 when it arrives. To the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane), I say that I completely recognise that Manchester airport is thoroughly important, not just for Manchester but for the whole of the north of England with its power to connect it. I can also confirm that we are developing plans for HS3 alongside HS2; they are not separate schemes being developed in isolation. We are looking at integration of the two.

I can confirm that we have had absolutely no loss of ambition. I will run through some timing: on phase 1, we hope the Bill will complete its passage through the
Lords very soon and we hope to start the build in the spring. The necessary work to prepare the Bill for phase 2a is underway and we intend for it to start its parliamentary journey next year. On phase 2b, the Government will announce our proposed route from Crewe to Manchester and from Birmingham to Leeds, south Yorkshire and the east midlands later this year. That will be an important moment and will begin to make the project far more tangible.

This is a project that is from the UK and for the UK. It is all about national benefits, including extra capacity on the network and developing skills, and companies from right across the UK will be able to benefit from the significant amount of work required. We view this as a critical part of our national infrastructure and of building a transport network and an economy that works for all. We have had a positive debate today. Though it has been focused on the north-west—and it is clearly right that this presents a huge opportunity for the north-west, for the city of Chester and for the whole region—it is a national project and we have to view it in that way.

**Jason McCartney:** Will the Minister give way? This will be very short.

**Andrew Jones:** It will have to be.
9.30 am

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered relations between Britain and Iran.

It is a great pleasure to serve once again under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson—it has been many times this week—to consider the relations of this great country with Iran. I have moved the motion because I am the first Member of this House to have Iranian heritage, although there are two Members of the House of Lords who are also from Iran.

Trading and cultural relations between Britain and Iran—or England and Persia, as they were then known—have existed since the early 17th century. The English vied with the French as some of the earliest translators of Farsi poetry into European languages; anybody who knows anything about Iranian culture knows the great cultural and symbolic nature of its poetry. In the 19th century Britain’s influence began to grow through acquiring trade concessions as a means of protecting the passage to India. At that time, there was great rivalry between Britain and Russia, with different spheres of influence in different parts of the country—Russian influence in the north, and British in the west. There were informal residencies in Iran from the mid and late 18th century until well into the 20th century, and what we now know as BP began life as the Anglo-Persian Oil Company in 1909.

There was a constitutional revolution in Iran in 1910, and at that time the revolutionaries actually took refuge in the British embassy gardens. There have been high and low points to the relationship between these two peoples throughout the 20th and 21st centuries. Since 1979 and the Islamic revolution—in just that short period—full diplomatic relations between the two countries have been resumed and broken three times. That reflects the desire for contact, relationship and dialogue between the two nations, but also the great sense of distrust that remains on both sides.

I come to this debate today with my eyes open about the reality of life in Iran. I am only here today because my family was forced to flee following the Islamic revolution, and my father had his business and our home confiscated. Many hon. Members will rightly and reasonably raise the Iranian Government’s record on human rights, women, press regulation and the treatment of minorities. Those are points of difference between the two Governments, and I am sure my hon. Friend the Minister will address them in his summing up.

Last year, an historic nuclear deal was signed. I am sure that all hon. Members attending today’s debate—many of whom have spoken on the subject before—will know the background, but it is worth reiterating. From 2006 onwards a series of UN and EU sanctions was imposed on the country following the International Atomic Energy Agency’s report on Iran’s nuclear programme. The Iranian regime always claimed that its nuclear programme was entirely peaceful, but the international community was alarmed by the thought of the country having a nuclear weapon and imposed a series of sanctions in relation to the nuclear programme. By summer 2013 the sanctions were having a profound effect on the Iranian people and Hassan Rouhani, the presidential candidate, fought his campaign on having serious talks with the west and getting the sanctions lifted. On 14 July last year, China, the US, Russia, Britain, France, Germany—the P5+1—the EU and Iran announced the joint comprehensive plan of action, according to which Iran would reverse its progress towards a nuclear weapon in return for the lifting of economic sanctions.

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the success of the negotiations with Iran was based around the economic impact on normal people? Does that therefore suggest that if a more military attack had taken place, it would have united people against the west, because the economic impact would have been far greater?

Seema Kennedy: I think that jaw-jaw is always better than war-war, and we have to consider all options before we enter into any military action.

In January this year we reached implementation day, when it was agreed by the observing authorities that Iran had reduced its uranium stockpile, cut its capacity to enrich uranium and modified the heavy water reactor at Arak. At that point the nuclear sanctions were lifted. I will not address the rights and wrongs of the nuclear deal, as many other hon. Members can speak on that, but I contend that the deal has made the region safer.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate at such a volatile time. It was an example of diplomacy in a part of the world where there has been too little of it.

Seema Kennedy: I would say to my hon. Friend that the deal was limited to Iran’s nuclear programme. I agree that there are many points of difference between our Governments and I am sure the Minister will address them in his summing up.

The deal made the region safer by reducing the possibility of a nuclear stand-off between regional rivals at such a volatile time. It was an example of diplomacy in a part of the world where there has been too little of it.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): Whatever the rights and wrongs of the nuclear agreements, there is still the issue in Iran of persecuted minorities, especially the Christian community. Surely it is time that was addressed, as well as the nuclear side of things.
Seema Kennedy: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who always speaks very powerfully in defence of Christian minorities. As I said in my opening statement, I am not blind to what happens in Iran and the treatment of certain groups. I hope that when the Minister sums up he will address what steps Government are taking through the Foreign Office, and now through our full diplomatic relations, on that issue.

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): Will my hon. Friend remind the hon. Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) that in Iran the Majlis reserves places, not only for the Jewish community but for the Christian community, in the Majlis, so that they have a part in the legislative process. That is not well-known and is something that is rare in the middle east.

Seema Kennedy: My hon. Friend has made the point, and I am sure the hon. Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) has heard it.

We cannot underestimate the wider implication of the nuclear deal for bringing Iran back into the international fold, and the joy with which the deal was greeted both on the streets of Tehran and in the wider diaspora of between 4 million and 5 million people. Shortly after that, in August, the then Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr Hammond), visited Tehran, which is something of a feat knowing the weather at that time of year. Full diplomatic relations were resumed this September, and in the same month British Airways resumed flights to Tehran six days per week. Just a few weeks ago at the UN General Assembly, the Prime Minister met Iran’s President Rouhani, who called the joint comprehensive plan of action a basis for closer bilateral co-operation.

There are plenty of warm words between Britain and Iran, but not an awful lot has happened since implementation day. The deal promised so much to businesses in the UK that wanted to trade, and to the Iranian people who are crying out for jobs and a better standard of living. Those promises are yet to be fulfilled. Iran has great potential as a country with which to build even stronger trade and cultural links.

Literacy in Iran is 85%, and the figure rises to 97% in 18 to 24-year-olds. The country holds 10% of the world’s oil and natural gas reserves. Historically, it has suffered from low economic growth, sharp fluctuations in revenue and low productivity, which has typically led to an overdependence on oil. Of course, we see that all over the region, and I would contend that overdependence on oil is part of the region’s problem, with a restive cohort of young people who have relied far too much on hydrocarbons.

Iran is moving towards a reduced dependence on oil, as it now accounts for only 30% of Iran’s budget and, for the first time, there is a positive trade balance in non-oil goods amounting to $1 billion. The International Monetary Fund estimates that Iran’s GDP will grow by at least 4.5% over the next year, and the rial continues to strengthen. Iran is focused on reducing inflation, and has reduced the role of its central bank to facilitate that and to make exports more competitive. Inflation is down from the historic high of 59% in the mid-1990s to 8% this year.

Companies are reticent about investing in Iran even though it is a natural market for Britain to export to. There are opportunities for British trade not only in energy, but in infrastructure. Last week, the state-owned National Iranian Oil Company sold condensate to BP for the first time since implementation day. However, anyone who has travelled in Iran knows that its infrastructure is crying out for investment, and it is said that the country needs $50 billion every year to upgrade its infrastructure. There are other opportunities for exporting British goods and services, particularly training. Businesses have told me that there is a dearth of people trained in administration and management, so the country could benefit from British expertise.

The big stumbling block about which British and Iranian businesses complain— I have spoken to the Minister about this on numerous occasions—is the remaining pre-nuclear sanctions, especially those around access to finance when doing business with Iran. Any banks with United States links are banned from doing business with the country: they are rightly terrified after the $9 billion fine that was levied on BNP Paribas. Lenders are restricted to those with absolutely no dollar exposure, which is a very small pool. Will the Minister confirm what further conversations he has had with his US counterparts on reassuring US banks that they will not be subject to large fines from the US authorities?

UK Trade & Investment statements on Iran are optimistic. UKTI says:

“There is a positive outlook for UK-Iran trade relations”, and that the UK Government

“fully supports expanding our trade relationship with Iran and we would encourage UK businesses to take advantage of the commercial opportunities that will arise”.

But the level of such trade remains unclear. Indeed, the European Union traded €6.5 billion to Iran in 2015 and imported €1.2 billion, but I was unable even to find UK-specific statistics.

On the size of cover allocated by UK Export Finance, it states that

“the total cover allocated for Iran will be under continuous review”.

Will the Minister tell us how much total cover is allocated for Iran and when will that be reviewed? Furthermore, will he confirm how much of the £50 million facility guaranteeing payments to UK professional advisory service providers advising the Government of Iran has been spent? There have been a lot of warm words but seemingly little progress on opening up the market to British businesses. How many, if any, business opportunities have been identified as a result of the memorandum of understanding signed between UKEF and the export guarantee fund of Iran?

France and Germany have led delegations to Iran, but Britain, even with the strong historical links that I outlined in my introduction, has lagged behind. I know that other hon. Members share my concerns about the effects of Brexit on Britain’s relationship with Iran.

Many of the smaller businesses that seek to trade with Iran are those run by members of the Iranian diaspora in the UK—a group of approximately 83,000 people. On behalf of that group, I pay tribute to the Minister for his role in saving Persian GCSEs and A-levels earlier this year. Knowledge of Farsi is crucial to preserving cultural heritage, and it eases the process of doing business between the two countries.
Members of the Iranian diaspora—who are, for the most part, dual nationals—are justifiably concerned about their status if they visit Iran, particularly in the fevered atmosphere leading up to next year’s presidential election and following the imprisonment of several dual nationals. Can the Minister give any guidance to dual British-Iranian nationals on their visits to Iran?

Soft power, it is always claimed, is key to British foreign policy. We are said to be the leader in soft power—[Interruption.] Somebody is laughing; I always wonder where we get these stats from as well. We should be exploiting our place in the world and our deep historical roots in the middle east to strengthen and encourage British trade with the region.

When it comes to soft power away from trade, there have always been cultural exchanges between universities, and art and cultural heritage groups. A series of exhibitions at the British Museum in 2009 were well attended and involved loans from museums in Iran. Those exchanges have continued and are an essential part of building understanding between the two peoples.

We cannot underestimate the power of cultural exchange and soft power, nor of symbolic gestures. Has the Minister’s Department considered the suggestion by the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs that the Government admit their role in the coup to overthrow Mosaddegh in exchange for an apology for the storming of the British embassy in 2011?

There is no doubt that many of our regional allies, especially members of the Gulf Co-operation Council, have been troubled by the UK’s renewed relationship with Iran, which they see as a threat to their relationship with us. However, it is not in the British national interest to see this as an either/or relationship, as that does not reflect the reality on the ground. Some 500,000 Iranians live in the United Arab Emirates, 80,000 in Kuwait, 173,000 in Bahrain and many in Saudi Arabia. The value of trade between Iran and the GCC is approximately $14.8 billion. Surely it is in the UK’s national interest to dampen down some of the fevered rhetoric between Iran and its Gulf neighbours, to unite in combating the evil death cult of Daesh and to work towards stability in the region?

Another area on which Britain and Iran have worked successfully together in the past is Afghanistan, in supporting the national unity Government and on counter-narcotics. What conversations has the Minister had with his Iranian counterparts on co-operating to defeat the Taliban in Afghanistan?

In conclusion, relations between Britain and Iran are of long standing. They are complex and often immensely frustrating. I look forward to hearing the contributions of hon. Members on both sides of the House who bring great experience, expertise and passion to this important debate.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr David Hanson (in the Chair): Order. From approximately 10.27, I intend to call each Front Bencher for a 10-minute contribution. A number of hon. Members are standing, and I hope that we can self-regulate our speaking arrangements accordingly.

9.49 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. This is the first time that I have served under your chairmanship in Westminster Hall, Mr Hanson, and I wish you well. A short time ago I was involved in a debate under your chairmanship on firearms issues, and it is good to see you here in that position. Well done to you.

I congratulate the hon. Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) on securing this debate. I will take a singular approach, and Members will not be surprised that I will speak about the persecution of Christians. I am sure that, when the Minister saw me get to my feet, he said, “I know what the gentleman is going to speak about.” I told the hon. Lady this morning that I would speak about the persecution of Christians.

I have recently returned from the middle east, more specifically the country of Iraq, which borders Iran. Perhaps that has given me a fresh understanding of what is happening in these countries and the help that is needed. We are under no illusion as to the history of our relations. Britain has sought an alliance since the 13th century, yet no time has been rockier than the past decade. With the reopening of the embassy in London and the signal that a path to some form of better co-operation is on the cards, now is the time to raise these matters, which need to be addressed as diplomatically as possible.

I thank some of the people in the Public Gallery who have an interest in Iran, and specifically in the persecution of Christians. There will be no surprise that I am focusing on the persecution of Christians in that area. I understand that we do not have massive influence to effect change. I am simply highlighting pertinent issues to allow the Minister to have all the information so that any and all available influence may be exerted for Christians who face persecution.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Does my hon. Friend agree that, on the issue of the persecution of Christians in the middle east and Iran, it is important that we make the highest level of representations to the Iranian authorities and across the middle east? Not only persecution but displacement and a resolute pursuit of Christians are happening in the middle east, and greater tolerance is needed for those with differing religious views.

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend clearly focuses attention on what I believe we all wish to happen.

Here are some facts about Iran. As converting from Islam is punishable by death for men and by life imprisonment for women, persecution in Iran is literally a matter of life and death. Although those who are considered ethnic Christians, such as Armenians and Assyrians, are allowed to practise their faith among themselves, ethnic Persians are defined as Muslim. Any Christian activity in the Persian language of Farsi is illegal. Islam is the official religion of Iran, and all laws there must match the requirements of sharia Islamic law. Only Armenians and Assyrians are allowed to be Christians, and even they are treated as second-class citizens. Those who try to reach out to Muslims have reported imprisonment, physical abuse and harassment. In a country of 80 million people, there are only 475,000 Christians.
As my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) said, Christians are an ethnic and religious group under great pressure and they are not left in peace to live their life according to their faith. Being a Christian in Iran can clearly be a matter of life and death. A Muslim who leaves Islam is considered an apostate and is at risk of the death penalty. Muslims are not even meant to shake hands with Christians, touch them or eat their food. Muslim-background believers often meet in house churches, but these are frequently monitored and raided by secret police.

I have brought the issue of Christians being arrested in their house churches to the Minister’s attention on a number of occasions. At least 108 Christians were arrested or imprisoned in 2015, and in several cases they have been physically and mentally abused. Pastor Behnam Irani, who is serving a six-year prison sentence, says:

“Many of my cellmates in prison ask me why I don’t just deny my belief and go back to my wife and children? I then ask myself: what cost did… the Lord pay to save me? I have decided to keep my faith in our Lord and stay in prison.”

He has no human rights and his family have no redress. He must simply live a life that we would not allow a dog to live in this country. That is what is happening to a minister and pastor of a church. That is what is happening to Christians in Iran.

It is widely reported that there are negotiations to allow Iran exemptions on the nuclear agreement. I have not been supportive in any way of any relaxation of regulations on a nation that has not proven itself to be trustworthy with such weapons of mass destruction. The Minister will recall our debate in the Chamber on the nuclear agreement and the concerns that not only I but many Conservative Members raised that night about change and to take the decisive step that is needed.

I will now conclude my speech, because I am conscious of the time. We must be able to exert some influence and diplomatic pressure. I look to the Minister to bring about change and to take the decisive step that is needed. Speak up and speak out for those who are prohibited from speaking for themselves, and put down a clear marker that such persecution cannot be allowed to continue behind closed doors in Iran.

9.59 am

Mr Richard Bacon (South Norfolk) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) on securing the debate; I know she is passionate about this subject. When I was elected to Parliament, I never expected that years later I would have the opportunity to introduce her to the Iranian Foreign Minister, Dr Zarif, as I did earlier this year, and that she would say “This is the happiest day since I was elected.”

It is hard to think of a subject on which there is more ignorance than Iran and our relations with it. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for whom I have a lot of respect, spoke articulately about the persecution of Christians. When I went to the World Against Violence and Extremism conference 18 months ago, which was organised by the President of the Republic, I was surprised and employment. In March 2015 the all-party Christians in Parliament group and the all-party parliamentary group on international freedom of religion or belief published a joint report on the persecution of Christians in Iran. The executive summary sums up much of what needs to be said here today:

“The joint-APPG Inquiry into the persecution of Christians in Iran held two oral evidence sessions (hereafter called ‘Westminster hearings’) in December 2014, and took testimony from thirteen witnesses. Some witnesses gave their statements via video, while others were interviewed in person by the panel. The Inquiry also received statements from NGOs and experts that work in this field. The Inquiry heard that the persecution of Christians in Iran has not diminished since Hassan Rouhani took the presidential office, despite his pre-election promises of greater respect for human rights.”

The facts and evidence are there for the country to see. The summary continues:

“Christians continue to be arbitrarily arrested and interrogated because of their faith-related activities. They continue to be treated harshly, with some facing severe physical and psychological torture during periods of detention. The judiciary continues to construe legitimate Christian activities (such as meeting in private homes for prayer meeting and bible studies, or being in contact with Christians outside of Iran) as political activities that threaten the national security of Iran.”

What nonsense. The summary continues:

“Therefore Christians continue to be issued long prison sentences and/or corporal punishment. Churches continue to be pressured into ceasing all services or activities in the national language of Persian (Farsi), or are closed down.”

We have evidence of that happening, too. It continues:

“Property belonging to Christians has continued to be seized, and Christians continue to face discrimination in the workplace and in educational institutions.”

All those things are happening. It continues:

“There has been no substantive change in Iran’s human rights record since the election of President Rouhani; in fact by some indicators you could argue that things have gotten worse.”

That seems to be the case: things have gotten worse.

I will now conclude my speech, because I am conscious of the time. We must be able to exert some influence and diplomatic pressure. I look to the Minister to bring about change and to take the decisive step that is needed. Speak up and speak out for those who are prohibited from speaking for themselves, and put down a clear marker that such persecution cannot be allowed to continue behind closed doors in Iran.
to be the only British person there apart from my translator, who is British-Iranian and British-born but speaks Farsi. There was a former Prime Minister of Norway; the former President Zardari, the widower of Benazir, from Pakistan; and the former Anglican Bishop of Washington, a Catholic cardinal, a professor from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and various others from the United States. I said to our Iranian hosts, “You should target those in the United States Congress who speak out most against you and get them to come here and see what a normal country Iran actually is.”

I ended up becoming chair of the all-party group on Iran slightly by accident, when my hon. Friend the Member for Wyre and Preston North (Mr Wallace) became a member of the Government and asked me if I would do it. The reason I got involved in the group was that four years ago, in 2012, it was seriously said that this country might consider attacking Iran with bombs. I was a Member of Parliament in 2003 when we attacked Iraq, and I voted against it. The arguments made in 2012 sounded eerily familiar to me. I decided that I was not going to trust anyone else’s opinion, so I went to the International Atomic Energy Agency in Vienna, met the nuclear inspectors who were going to Iran, heard what they had to say and wrote it down in a hardback book, which I still have. They said, “We have no evidence of nuclear weapons-grade material.” It is also worth recalling that Iran is a signatory to the non-proliferation treaty, which various other countries such as India, Pakistan and Israel are not.

The real ignorance, though, stems from something else. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble pointed out, our history with Iran goes back for several centuries. Relatively little of that history, particularly over the past 100 years, reflects well on this country. There are a lot of reasons, many of them good ones, why the Iranians have been very prickly towards us.

Mr Gregory Campbell: I ask the hon. Gentleman to reflect on what he said about his attendance at the conference. I have no doubt whatever that it would be a good thing for more people to go to Iran and see what type of country it is. However, he said that Iran could be seen as a normal country.

Mr Bacon: Yes.

Mr Gregory Campbell: Presumably he will take the opportunity to rectify that comment in the light of the litany of instances of persecution of Christians in that country.

Mr Bacon: No. There is persecution throughout the world. Many people think that abortion is a fundamental human right and that for a country to make it illegal is not normal. I happen to disagree with them, but the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Strangford represent constituencies in which abortion is still illegal. I think that is a decision for local people to make locally, but what constitutes “normal” is actually a very wide spectrum.

The key point that needs to be understood is that after 9/11, while much of the middle east was yodelling in the street at the destruction of the twin towers and the murder of many thousands of people, including many Muslims, Iran flew its flags at half mast, held candlelit vigils and offered the United States strategic and logistical help in the fight against the Taliban, which was accepted.

I hope the hon. Member for Strangford, as a serious religious man, will listen carefully to this: what is least understood about all these imbroglios, and indeed about what is going on in Syria, is that to the Taliban, al-Qaeda and now Daesh, the first enemy is not the west and not Christians but the Shi’a. It should come as no surprise to anyone that the Iranians are supporting the Shi’a in Syria, or that the Iranians were opposed to the Taliban who wanted to kill the Shi’a. It should come as no surprise that the Iranians were deeply opposed to al-Qaeda, which particularly attacks the Shi’a.

Jim Shannon: I do not disagree with the hon. Gentleman, but the point that my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) and I are trying to make is that 108 Christians were arrested and imprisoned last year. That is hardly an indication of a Government that is open and inclusive of Christianity. Pastor Behnam Irani is serving a six-year prison sentence because he is a Christian who refused to accept the Muslim religion and wanted to preach to his people. That is an example of what is taking place.

Mr Bacon: Did the hon. Gentleman say 108?

Jim Shannon: Yes, 108.

Mr Bacon: That is exactly the same number of people who were beheaded in Saudi Arabia last year. I know that that is equally irrelevant, but let me just point out—[ Interruption. ]

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Bacon: I will not give way at the moment. I have the floor, and I will not give way. This is a free Parliament and I will have my say, and what I want to say is that we will have better relations with Iran and more opportunities to influence it, including on questions of Christianity, if we talk to it.

After I went to the British embassy in Vienna and met the British ambassador, the diplomats dropped us off outside the door of the Iranian embassy, where Ambassador Soltanieh, Iran’s ambassador to the IAEA for many years, was still in residence. I was amazed that the British diplomats, who were paid for by our constituents’ taxes, said to us at the door of the embassy, “We’ll be leaving you here—we won’t be going in. We’re polite to them when we have to be, but we have as little to do with them as possible.” I remember being shocked and thinking, “Do you think it’s just possible that if you knew the names of Ambassador Soltanieh’s grandchildren, you might have a better relationship and get more engagement?”

Hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble, have talked about commercial relations. I commend to them the speech made in this Chamber on 26 March 2014—at column 117WH of the Official Report—by the former Foreign Secretary and right hon. Member for Blackburn, Jack Straw, in which he talked about commercial trade between Iran and the United States. Despite there being no diplomatic relations, the US’s trade is going up at the same time that Iran is using
commercial penalties to discriminate against other companies, particularly British companies—although I am pleased to say that Group Lotus, the largest private sector employer in my constituency, opened a car dealership in Tehran two weeks ago and sold 20 cars.

I will not concentrate on the geopolitics any more, because other Members will doubtless have things to say about that and I do not want to take up too much more time. In my remaining minutes, I will refer briefly to another matter. I have mentioned that it is hardly a surprise that Iran is involved in protecting the Shi’a. What is not known is that in 2003, through the Swiss ambassador, the Iranians made an offer to the United States that would have involved support for the Arab League’s 22-state Beirut declaration. It would have involved mutual recognition of Israel; an end to military support for Hezbollah and help with its conversion to a purely political party; and intrusive nuclear inspections. I very much regret to say that the United States rejected that offer and managed in the process to call Iran part of the “axis of evil”. It is hard to think of a more crass way to respond to such an offer. The direct consequence was the election of the hard-liner Ahmadinejad.

Iran is a very complex place. My hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble said many insightful things, but one of the most insightful was that it is not either/or situation. It is complex and nuanced, and there are plenty of people in Iran who want the relationship to fail.

Five Iranian MPs came here last year for a very successful visit. We had quite a lot happening in Westminster and Whitehall, and we took them to see a professor of literature at Cambridge for what proved to be an extremely fruitful exchange. It was a low-key visit, partly because we understood from talking to the diplomats that the Iranians were concerned that any failure of the visit would strengthen the hand of the people back in Iran who wanted to point at them and say, “You see? We told you it wouldn’t work.” In fact, the reverse occurred.

You don’t make peace with your friends; you make peace with your enemies. I do not think we should have enemies—we should try hard to work co-operatively with everyone. There is a huge amount to do on Iran. Let us not forget that, following the implementation of the joint comprehensive plan of action, the IAEA has said four times in four reports this year that Iran has met its obligations. It is not completely obvious whether we are meeting ours. I wrote to the Governor of the Bank of England about that recently, because at the moment British-Iranian registered banks that are UK-authorised and regulated are unable to do business in the UK or send and receive sterling payments. They cannot even easily pay their council tax. An Iran Air flight that lands at Heathrow has to have enough fuel to be able to take off again and land in Vienna, where it can fuel up and pay. Many other countries in Europe have managed to sort out such payments, so I hope that the Minister will address that. I know he thinks he will need the help of the Treasury, which is why I copied my letter to the Governor to the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

It is worth pointing out that on the Bank of England website, among its various roles in undertaking a wide range of policy and operational responsibilities that are vital to the functioning of a smooth economy, the Bank itself clearly states:

“It is also the role of the Banking Directorate”, which is within the Bank of England, “to respond to unpredictable and exceptional events in the financial system.”

I think we have an exceptional event in Iran. There is, in effect, an exceptional circumstance that requires an extraordinary solution.

No one pretends that this is easy or that we will solve all the problems overnight, but I invite Members to join the all-party group and support our endeavours for better relations. We have an interesting meeting coming up on 18 October with Sir William Patey, the former British ambassador to Saudi Arabia; Professor Ali Ansari from the University of St Andrews; Jack Straw himself; and Michael Stephens, a research fellow from the Royal United Services Institute. They will be talking about Iran-Saudi relations, which is the real fulcrum of the problem that we have in the middle east.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr David Hanson (in the Chair): Order. Three hon. Members from the same party have risen to speak. We have approximately 16 minutes; the maths speaks for itself.

10.11 am

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) on securing the debate. I introduced a debate on human rights in Iran on 28 June. I do not intend to repeat all the issues that were raised then. Given the amount of time I have, I shall concentrate on two issues: the information that emerged over the summer about a massacre in 1988, and Iran’s regional aggression.

It has become known that, in 1988, the Iranian regime executed more than 30,000 people. Many of them were political prisoners held in jails. Some were people who had been released from jail, having served their sentence, but who were then summarily recalled and executed.

The majority were serving prison sentences for political activities or, as I said, had already finished their sentences. After a fatwa was issued by Ayatollah Khomeini, the wave of executions began in late July 1988 and continued for a few months. Many of those killed refused to repent their beliefs and as such were executed. What action is the Minister taking to ensure that the regime in Tehran not only acknowledges what happened but takes action to ensure that those responsible, many of whom are still in power, are brought to justice? Will the Minister ask the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, the UN Human Rights Council and the UN Security Council to order an investigation to achieve that?

I turn to some issues that have arise in the past 15 months, since the nuclear deal was agreed. I was very much against the deal. I was disappointed that the issue of human rights was decoupled from the deal, because that was a missed opportunity to put pressure on the Iranian regime. I think it was a vainglorious attempt by President Obama to secure a legacy—a legacy that will not actually be achieved. We have seen that with the number of people that Iran has continued to execute over the past 15 months. My hon. Friend the Member
for South Norfolk (Mr Bacon) talked about abortion and what is and what is not normal. It is not normal to execute nine-year-old girls.

Mr Bacon: I did not say it was.

Dr Offord: I never suggested that my hon. Friend said it was, but I am saying that it is not normal to execute nine-year-old girls, or boys at the age of 15 or, indeed, to gouge out anyone’s eyes. It is not normal to execute people in the way and numbers in which they are currently being executed in Iran. There has been much comment in the debate about the different sections of Iranian society that have been persecuted, including the Sunnis, the Kurds and the Baha’i. I received an email from the National Union of Journalists about its brothers and sisters in Iran who are not able to undertake their work as journalists and are not in a free civil society. I do not feel that that is normal either.

In July this year, the UK’s ambassador to the United Nations expressed his concern about Iran’s regional aggression, declaring that the ballistic missiles tested by Iran are designed to deliver nuclear weapons. In his speech to the UN Security Council, Ambassador Rycroft made it clear that Iran’s continued testing of ballistic missiles which are designed to be capable of carrying nuclear weapons is destabilising to regional security and inconsistent with Resolution 2231”, as others have said already.

In the past 12 hours or so, there has been much comment in the media about the Foreign Secretary’s comments, in yesterday’s debate on Syria, about the role of Russia. But Russia is not the only game in town. Russia may have what we might call interests in—or may interfere in—Ukraine and Syria, but Iran interferes in and has much greater interests in other parts of the region. It interferes not only in Yemen, but in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Afghanistan. The tentacles from Tehran continue to spread. That has been allowed and achieved as a result of the nuclear deal unfreezing assets that the Revolutionary Guard and others are using to cause dissent in the region.

10.15 am

Kit Malthouse (North West Hampshire) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under a fellow Liverpudlian, Mr Hanson.

I rise to speak in this debate because, for me, Iran represents a fork in the road for British foreign policy. Yesterday, we saw highlighted starkly the limits of the isolation and damnation until the point of intervention policy of the past 20 years. Given that we cannot afford, militarily, socially or financially, to do the same again, our approach to Iran is critical.

Before I continue, I acknowledge and reiterate the fact that, for our own safety and for that of the Iranians, we cannot waver on the question of Iran gaining nuclear weapons. It needs to understand that working with the P5+1 is vital, because it is far better to deal with us in a rule-bound international system than to chance its hand with other, perhaps more powerful, nations in the region. For our own part, we cannot allow the Iranians to trigger a proliferation race across the whole middle east and add layer upon layer to existing nuclear states’ deterrence calculations. That would be a recipe for disaster, especially in a region where civilian control over military arsenals is imperfect and the experience of safety issues is less developed.

Following the deal, it was pleasing to see the reopening of the embassy and the risks of a nuclear standoff more remote than we had feared a few years earlier. I, too, remember the cover of The Economist in February 2012, and the headline “Bombing Iran”. It seems that sanctions worked in Iran, but it could be argued that we saw their limits. They arguably forced the end of the Ahmadinejad Government and brought forward a more conciliatory one in Rouhani’s Government, but it is unrealistic to expect the people to blame only their own Government for their hardship and it is imprudent to weaken the position of Rouhani versus hardliners.

From now on, perhaps we should attempt to build bridges to generate good will. We need to change the calculation of interests in Tehran so that the costs of a combative approach are seen as being far greater than those of a co-operative one. Yes, that signal should be sent with strength and not appeasement, but it does require us not to be openly hostile. Progress can be made, and it should be, not least because we know that our own western liberal culture is a kind of benign Japanese knotted. It is invasive, and it starts in no better place than at the intellectual level, in academia. Although we are right to acknowledge the regime’s oppressive treatment of academics and disregard for the principles of free speech and free exchange that are so vital to academic debate, Iran still has a highly educated population, as others have pointed out—I gather it has 97% literacy among the young—and the potential to reach and surpass its previous achievements is there, if we engage.

Some promising moves are already under way in academia. For example, the School of Oriental and African Studies has just introduced the option of an exchange or visit to Iran as part of a course; the University of Cambridge has just signed a direct exchange agreement with the embassy; the British Institute of Persian Studies has a Tehran institute; and SOAS and the Universities of Edinburgh, Oxford and St Andrews all now offer Persian at degree level. Such trusses of co-operation can help to build and strengthen the bridge of understanding between the UK and Iran, which can only aid relationships at a political level.

More of the same would be positive. We should not forget that President Rouhani himself is a product of the University of Glasgow and does not have the same hostility towards the UK as his predecessor. He speaks English with a Scottish accent—or so I am told. This is cheap diplomacy, but it can build links among people in our societies that enhance the level of understanding among Governments. Business links, tourism and investment will surely follow. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr Bacon) that we cannot allow the US to declare itself the world’s financial policeman. Our firms should not fear US sanctions for following UK law.

If we acknowledge that our diplomacy can gradually change Iran and its stance towards the world, we must acknowledge at the same time that Iran has enormous influence in the middle east. Given how deeply it is in our interests to see a stable and prosperous middle east, and how great the costs of failure are, as we are seeing, we cannot ignore the opportunity that engagement with
Iran offers. Put simply, even if it seems to follow from our current configuration of alliances that we should be hostile, to be so would be to give in to “enemy of my enemy”, or rather “friend of my enemy is my enemy” thinking, in its crudest form.

Mr Bacon: Is my hon. Friend as surprised as I am that many people seem to be surprised that Iran would wish to exercise influence in its region? That is what all countries do in relation to their neighbours.

Kit Malthouse: It comes as no surprise to me, and of course it is reinforced by the hostile posture that the west has had thus far. Whenever we are hostile to countries—whether it is Russia or wherever—the first thing they do is turn inwards and look to their immediate region for defence. So it is no surprise that Iran has done the same.

As hon. Members have already said, Iran today is without doubt troublesome and destructive; some appalling things happen there. However, that will continue to happen and Iran will continue to be troublesome and destructive, even if we continue our tough line. Surely it cannot be in our interest to adopt an aggressive stance towards Iran at a time when there is an uncertain Saudi Arabian leadership transition, a worsening Syrian war and Russian aggression. The prize of a warmer relationship between Britain and Iran is too great not to try for it. The real prize is preventing Tehran’s alignment with Moscow from crystallising, and a de-escalation of the proxy fight between Iran and Saudi Arabia that has enflamed Syria, Iraq and Yemen. We should not take that alignment as set in stone, especially given that we have so much more to offer Iran than Russia or the Syrian Government do. We should try. Succeed, and the whole region starts to look very different and a less threatening place. One would not expect Saudi Arabia’s actions in Yemen. We should try on securing this debate. She said two important things: that jaw-jaw is better than war-war; and that it is not a black-and-white situation.

Let us think of the alternative. I remember standing in the House of Commons when the nuclear deal with Iran was announced, and there and then I asked the then Foreign Secretary what the alternative would have been. He was very clear—the alternative was that we would have gone to war. What debate would we be having in this House today if we were dropping bombs on Iran—bombs that would have done nothing, because we know from the inspectors that the targets were probably sunk in eight miles of mountainside? More importantly, and as my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) made excellent opening contribution, and I congratulate her on securing this debate. She said two important
However, there is a genuine concern about the actions that take place around Israel, and as a democratic state we have a duty to ensure that we support fellow democratic states that see terrorist organisations trying to undermine them. Also, we must accept that Iran at this stage may be putting more money into Hezbollah and Hamas, but that does not mean we walk away and say, “I’m sorry, Iran. We’ve decided that we’re going to bomb the backside out of you, like the rest of the middle east”, which, quite frankly, is going to hell in a handcart. How do we resolve the situation in Syria? Not easily, but Iran will be a major point of reference in that.

I will finish by simply saying, “Well done”, to my hon. Friends the Members for South Ribble and for North West Hampshire. They have made some excellent points. It is a complex situation, but my goodness—today’s debate is far better than the debate we would have been having if we were killing hundreds of thousands of innocent people.

10.27 am

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): Thank you for calling me to speak, Mr Hanson; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) on securing this debate. She mentioned that she is the first person with Iranian heritage to be elected to the House; I am the first MP from the council estate of Castlemilk, but her heritage is perhaps slightly more exotic than mine.

At the outset, I must say that I thought the hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) made an excellent speech. I did not buy all of it, but I thought he struck a very good balance. It is undoubtedly a good thing that we are now in a position to have these positive discussions with Iran. Indeed, I welcome the developments that have brought us to this point and I invite the House to reflect on a fact that I had hoped I could make mine, but it was stolen by the hon. Gentleman—namely, that the current President of Iran was educated at university in Glasgow. It was at Glasgow Caledonian University, as opposed to Glasgow University; I say that just to correct the record.

I have listened with interest to the contributions that have been made. Indeed, I share some of the optimism that some people feel that we are moving in the right direction, but I also think we have to pause for thought. The nuclear deal is to be celebrated; I observe that it has been one of the Government’s few foreign policy successes.

In fact, I recall that, as a new Member, I attended the Foreign Office briefing for new MPs, when the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the right hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr Hammond), who was then the Foreign Secretary, had just flown in from the talks about the nuclear deal. He then briefed us on his departmental responsibilities. However, progress is required in many other areas—some of which have already been outlined by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and other hon. Members—before we should be too enthusiastic about entering into a commercial embrace with Iran.

Members have stated correctly the need for consistency. Indeed, the hon. Member for Strangford and I have been consistent in speaking out against human rights abuses in countries such as Saudi Arabia, which has been mentioned several times this morning. That consistency requires us to do the same when it comes to Iran. Should we be so comfortable about embracing a country that is part of a tangled web of complex relationships that are causing so many problems around the world and in fact are working in direct opposition to our own foreign policy objectives? I am not suggesting we cut all ties and walk away, but the relationship has to be thought through and balanced.

We have to consider what Iran’s relationships with some of its proxies in the middle east mean for that strategy—it’s relationship with Hamas, Hezbollah and the Assad Government in Syria. What those relationships represent is not good for peace in the middle east. In fact, they undermine some of our own objectives in the middle east. If we get the strategy wrong, we risk a very dangerous outcome.

From my knowledge and interest in UK-Saudi affairs, I would say it is imperative that, before we embark on a full commercial relationship with the Iranian regime—let us not doubt for a moment that that many of these businesses will be closely linked to the Iranian deep state—we do not allow it to reach the stage that it has with Saudi Arabia, where commercial considerations trump good foreign policy making.

What of the human rights record in Iran, much of which was brilliantly outlined by the hon. Member for South Ribble (Jim Shannon)? Although in some respects it is not quite as medieval as Saudi Arabia, there are enormously alarming cases that should cause us to pause for thought, such as the case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, which has been mentioned several times in the House. She is a British-Iranian citizen who has been subjected to 45 days of solitary confinement, denied legal representation and subsequently sentenced after a secret trial to five years in prison on unspecified national security charges. This is one of numerous cases of the Iranian authorities imprisoning dual nationals, which they do not even recognise, on unspecified charges.

I listened to the hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr Bacon) with an open mind, and I listened with interest to his description of visiting Iran. Perhaps when he returns he can ask to visit the notorious Evin detention centre, which is well known for housing political prisoners, intellectuals and academics, many of whom we have celebrated here this morning.

The case of Salman Rushdie, a personal hero of mine and one of the world’s most celebrated essayists and novelists, is more widely known. He has spent a large chunk of his adult life in hiding in this country with a death sentence hanging over his head because the Iranian Government did not like some words he had written in “The Satanic Verses”. The hon. Member for South Ribble opened her remarks by talking about the importance of celebrating poetry and cultural links with Iran. Perhaps if we had had some of that at the time of the publication of his book, Mr Rushdie would have been a free man for longer than he has been allowed to be.

Members may have thought that the case of Mr Rushdie had almost died and gone away, but as recently as this year the Iranian state media added $600,000 dollars to the existing cash that was offered for the killing of Mr Rushdie, one of the finest advocates for free speech that this country has ever been home to.

I am pleased that our diplomatic relations have been upgraded, but that did not happen overnight. The Minister, his Department and several of our allies applied themselves
over a long period of time, often when it seemed hopeless and when entrenched interests tried to veto progress, to achieve the circumstances that brought us the nuclear deal, resulting in the change in diplomatic relations. It shows what can be achieved when there is political will to achieve progress in relations with hitherto hostile states.

I appeal to the House—perhaps not the hon. Member for South Ribble who secured this debate, because of her own personal experience—not to be so naive and idealistic as to think that we have reached a point where trade relations can be normal with Iran. If a price is to be put on UK-Iranian relations, let it be calculated in progress on human rights and a foreign policy that does not continue to undermine our own interests in the middle east.

10.34 am

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship once again, Mr Hanson. I congratulate the hon. Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) on her excellent speech, and particularly her references to her own family. It is always a pleasure to hear about other Members’ backgrounds and their interests in Parliament. I want to put on the record my interest in Iran, not least because of my reading of the novel “Persepolis” by Marjane Satrapi, which I am sure many Members know and which has been made into a lovely film. I hope many can watch that film and learn about Persia, its history and about the beautiful Farsi language.

We are so lucky to have room 52 at the British Museum just down the road, so that we can go and see all the beautiful cultural treasures from Cyrus the Great’s 6th-century Persian empire. We also have my alma mater, the School of Oriental and African Studies. I am delighted to hear from other Members today that SOAS is offering trips to Iran as part of scholars’ interest in that wonderful country. One day I hope to visit Persepolis and see the wonderful marbles. Of course, Iran has 21 UNESCO world heritage sites.

I also want to put on the record my appreciation and that of Labour Members of the role of the European Union foreign team, including the excellent work that Cathy Ashton did, in developing the big step forward that was made in July 2015 in what is now called the Iranian nuclear deal. Sometimes we forget the important role that the European Union has played in foreign affairs.

I look forward to the Minister’s comments on Iran. I ask him whether we can anticipate what resources there will be in the Foreign Office in years to come, when we may be doing foreign affairs in a slightly different way following our Brexit negotiations. How many experts in the Foreign Office speak Farsi, for example? I am sure we have a couple with us today, but is there an argument for increased resource so that we can meet demand?

Members are right not to have too rosy a view of Iran. I was pleased that the hon. Members for Glasgow South (Stewart Malcolm McDonald) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned the persecution of Christians and other minority groups. We know that many gay people have a very difficult time in Iran. We also know that the arbitrary imprisonment of human rights activists is a common occurrence, which many Members raise regularly at Foreign Office questions.

Following the question asked in the House of Lords in September 2016, will the Minister update us on the release of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe? Many constituents have written to Members about her case. It is great that we have so many constituents who are concerned about the position of women in Iran. I am sure the hon. Member for South Ribble also feels strongly about that, and I am sure she will raise that matter if she gets the opportunity, perhaps through her work on the all-party group when it visits Iran.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for South Norfolk (Mr Bacon) and the all-party group for the work that they do. It is slightly under-appreciated outside Parliament just how much cross-party work can be done. I understand that there was a trip in recent years when the former Member for Blackburn went to Iran with my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn). I do not know whether the hon. Member for South Norfolk was present on that trip, but there is a lot that can be done, with a cross-section of interests, to promote good relations and a positive side of foreign affairs. We all come from different constituencies and have different interests, but in the end we are trying to promote dialogue and a peaceful future in the middle east.

The hon. Gentleman was right to say that we have common interests with Iran, particularly with regard to the current conflict in the middle east and how we can tackle the long-term problem of al-Qaeda and Daesh. I wonder whether we could question the Foreign Office more on that cross-section of interests, including on how we as parliamentarians could push forward on those issues.

I want to emphasise a couple of points that have come up in my research. We are focusing very much on the positive today, but there is of course always unpredictability to our relations with Iran—I think particularly of the 2011 incident when a mob stormed the British Embassy, which it is important to put on record in a debate such as this. There have been cautious steps forward, but we must not forget the importance of our staff’s safety. That incident did lead to a slight step backwards.

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Lady and other hon. Members have mentioned some dreadful incidents that have taken place in Iran. Would she accept that part of the argument about engaging with Iran is that we need to recognise that millions of Iranians will have been horrified at those events too? Millions of Iranians who saw the storming of the British Embassy will have held their hands up in horror at what was happening and the damage that it was wreaking to their relations with the rest of the world.

Catherine West: The hon. Gentleman is right to put on record how these incidents need to be regarded and to say that we need to move forward and not dwell on things, but it is equally correct to put it on record that sometimes it feels a bit like two steps forward, one step back. That is the case in any relationship—in the major foreign policy discussion that we are having at the moment around Brexit, day by day we move small
inches forward and a couple of steps back. We need to be realistic about that process when talking about important, strategic places such as Iran.

I will come to a conclusion, as I am sure the Minister is keen to make his remarks. I press him on the question of providing further debating time for this important relationship; on how we can work together to strengthen our approach to tackling security concerns around al-Qaeda and Daesh, including by working with Iran at a cross-sectional interest level; and on how we can promote the understanding of cultural and language groups, through the all-party parliamentary group, our excellent universities such as SOAS and places such as the British Museum. I was pleased to hear that the Minister had stepped in to save Farsi as a taught language. Along with Mandarin, Arabic, Turkish and Greek, Farsi needs to be on the curriculum much more regularly in our schools and universities, and I was pleased to hear of his interesting role in that. I look forward to his updating us not just on human rights concerns in Iran but on how we can work more cohesively and positively towards our relationship with that great country.

10.43 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr Tobias Ellwood): I thank all hon. Members who have participated in what has been an excellent debate. I begin by thanking my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) for what I thought was a powerful and emotive, but very sober, reflection on Britain’s relationship with Iran. The duality of the situation that we face with Iran at this juncture was reflected in the contributions right across the field.

I was pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble began by highlighting the history and the context in which we find ourselves today. We sometimes rush into these debates, looking at the details, without first appreciating or reminding ourselves of that bond. It is perhaps more relevant in the countries in the middle east. To them, the bonds that existed in the past are very important—we perhaps gloss over them, and we should remind ourselves. I appreciate that my hon. Friend reminded us of what happened in the 1800s and before, as our English naval capability was strengthening its ties and its trade relationships with India, Iran and the Trucial agreement that took place with the Gulf nations—indeed, the role of Persia in the great game—were all part of the tapestry that created those bonds, which were furthered by the discovery of oil and the beginnings of what is today BP. There is a legacy and history that ties us together and of which we should be reminded, as we look to embark on a new relationship following the important, generational change and opportunity that Iran now has with the nuclear deal.

We were reminded of the size of the diaspora in this country, which is connected to what happened in the 1979 revolution—about 85,000 people are directly connected with Iran. We were also reminded of the 2016 elections. Without delving too much into domestic matters, I was buoyed by the outcome of those elections and the change in the approach and direction of travel in the Majlis and in the Assembly of Experts. We are seeing the country take positive steps.

My hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) highlighted the very educated, very young population, who are as aware as anybody of what is happening in the rest of the world and are expressing a desire to have a good, solid, positive and responsible relationship within their own country, the region and the rest of the world. That is what the bulk of ordinary Iranians are asking for. The issue is—dare I say?—the old guard, who at the moment very much recognise a desire for change in their country, but are unsure of how to embark on the next steps and how to adapt to the change the people of their country are demanding of them.

Many hon. Members, but specifically my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—who I will call my honourable friend in this context and who has persistently and consistently raised the issue—spoke of the importance of the plight of Christians and other minorities such as the Baha’is. That shows the duality that we face here. There is an opportunity for trade, engagement and so on but there is still much work to do in other areas. We have to decide how we fit into that—how to balance that interest and opportunity while taking advantage of greater engagement and conversation to encourage change in those other critical areas.

As with other debates, I will write to my hon. Friends and hon. Members in reply to their specific questions, particularly where I do not have the answers right now. That is not a cop-out; it will allow me to give hon. Members answers in depth. I will focus the rest of my time on the questions posed by my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble, who began by talking about the trade opportunities that exist.

We should not ignore the fact that this is the biggest new market to open up in a decade. Trade is certainly growing. Since the nuclear deal and the relaxation of sanctions, our bilateral trade has increased. I pay tribute to the Prime Minister’s envoy, Lord Lamont, who has done a sterling job in bringing leaders, for instance Foreign Minister Zarif, to meet parliamentarians and business people. That helps to create the atmosphere where business can be conducted. Lord Lamont has taken delegations out to Tehran as well.

There are clearly huge areas of opportunity, not just in hydrocarbons and traditional areas. There has been little spending on infrastructure in Tehran for more than three decades. We have a role that we can play, if we choose, but as has been expressed across the board, there is a massive hindrance at the moment. There is a huge hurdle at the moment in the form of legacy sanctions and US sanctions connected to the banking sector, which prohibit US passport holders from being able to do business—or make them worried to do business—for fear of triggering US sanctions. I have had discussions with John Kerry—with the Americans and others—and we came close to having a meeting with the Office of Foreign Assets Control, which is the US Treasury committee that focuses on this issue. We were not successful in getting that meeting, but we will persevere to make that happen. John Kerry and the director of OFAC, John Smith, said that they do not stand in the way of business being permitted in the context of the joint comprehensive plan of action. However, businesses, including big British banks, have raised the cautionary concern that US passport holders do not feel confident at the moment to go and do business in Tehran. The Government understand that we need to resolve that issue urgently.
We are also offering financial support. The Bank of England's role was mentioned, and we have other financial services. Given the experience of the City, we are offering Tehran advice and support on how it can introduce anti-money laundering programmes and counter the financing of terrorism. We want to ensure that those products are in place as its own financial services develop.

Mr Ellwood: My hon. Friend makes an important point. In fact, we discussed that matter in some of the forums we had with leaders who have come over from Iran. I am very much focused on going back to that committee. Unfortunately, the very people who wanted to attend felt that they might trigger the sanctions simply by being at the meeting to discuss this matter. That is the cautionary environment that we now face.

The hon. Member for Hornsey and Wood Green (Catherine West) asked whether our embassy has the capacity to grow and whether we have the capability. Absolutely, we do. As trade starts to develop, all embassies will make an assessment of where things are moving and where developments are taking place. We have now got an embassy with a full ambassador in place, so that is already happening.

Catherine West: Can the Minister tell me how many people speak Farsi in the Foreign Office in London?

Mr Ellwood: I will certainly get the hon. Lady the details on that important question.

Our embassy is growing. I am pleased to say that ambassadors are now in place on both sides. There was some sniggering when soft power was mentioned, but I must stress that we are considering one of the world’s most important and influential soft powers. It is because we are a permanent member of the United Nations; we are committed, engaged and determined to understand the world around us; we have a hard-power capability and are the biggest military force in Europe; we have a history and a relationship with many countries around the world; and we remain committed, transparent and trusted. That all adds up to being a super power. That is why debates like this are important. Those things allow us to have more influence over other countries that do not have such relationships and simply shout from afar expecting change to happen.

Mr Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): I entirely agree with what the Minister said about the UK’s soft power in the world. He said that, after Brexit, we will continue to have a strong role on the world stage, in particular at the UN. I do not know whether the Minister is going to get to this point but, in relation to the nuclear deal, what is the UK’s response to Iran’s breach of UN resolution 2231 through ballistic testing and so on? What assessment has the Minister made of it? What are we doing at the UN about it?

Mr Ellwood: I will come to that point in a second. The short answer is that the two issues are quite separate. The nuclear deal stands alone and is specifically to do with containment of the ability to develop a nuclear weapon. Resolution 2231 is to do with ballistic missiles and the capability of launching an intercontinental or a nuclear weapon using that vehicle. The tests that are taking place are triggering further sanctions separate to the nuclear deal.

The next question that my hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble asked was about dual nationals. That is a very sensitive issue, as hon. Members will be aware, because Iran does not recognise dual nationality, which causes problems and is a concern to anybody choosing to travel to Iran thinking that they will be supported by Britain in the way they would if they had sole British citizenship. That is the challenge that we face. We are working very hard on a number of consular cases, particularly those of Kamal Foroughi and Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe. Those are two of the most prominent cases, and hon. Members will have had many letters on those matters. They are dual nationals, and that is the challenge that we face. I encourage anybody with a dual nationality who is thinking of travelling to Iran to look carefully at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office website before travelling so they are fully aware of the situation.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble also talked about Iran’s maturing stance following the nuclear deal. The deal allows a change in attitude towards Iran and further dialogue on the human rights issues that have been discussed, to which I am afraid I cannot do justice in the short time remaining.

Iran is at a crossroads. The nuclear deal that has been signed with the UK and the other E3+3 countries is an opportunity.

Kwasi Kwarteng (Spelthorne) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Ellwood: I cannot give way, because I have to allow a couple of minutes for the proposer of the motion to speak.

We must take a balanced approach. We must robustly enforce the nuclear deal and check the human rights concerns that have been raised in this debate, while
promoting trade opportunities. We stand ready to help Iran at this juncture, but we expect it to check its proxy influence in the region around it and play a responsible role as it moves into the future.

10.58 am

Seema Kennedy: I thank colleagues for their many thoughtful and interesting contributions to this debate. My hon. Friend the Member for South Norfolk (Mr Bacon) spoke with great experience about the need for more knowledge and engagement. My hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse) put Iran in the wider context of Britain’s foreign policy. My hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) said rightly that it is good that we are not here having bombed Iran in 2012. My hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) always speaks powerfully and he put on the record his concerns about the treatment of women and religious minorities in Iran. I thank all hon. Members for their time. I thank the Minister for his response. I asked a number of technical questions, and I look forward to his responses to those he could not answer in his speech.

Iran is a middle east superpower and a vital key in the region’s security. All avenues of engagement and dialogue to build a bridge of understanding, to quote my hon. Friend the Member for North West Hampshire, should be pursued. Debates in this House are a vital part of such bridge building, and I thank all hon. Members who attended.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered relations between Britain and Iran.

11 am

Stephen Phillips (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered cycling in Lincolnshire.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hanson. We used to have adjacent offices, and I know that my office could sometimes be noisy, so I hope you will forgive me for that. I am pleased to see that the debate does not appear to have attracted much attention, at least among Opposition Members, but there we are.

For those who are not lucky enough to have spent time in Lincolnshire, I have to say—it is important that this is recorded for posterity in the journals of the House—that it is a beautiful place, with big skies and verdant countryside, and it is just made for cycling. As someone who gets out on their bike a fair bit, I can vouch for the fun and good exercise that is to be had as a casual cyclist, as well as the opportunity to get out into the nature, clear the head and appreciate the loveliness of our surroundings.

Many of my constituents use their bikes more practically and a considerable amount more than I do. Although many of us in the country use our cars to travel long distances from place to place, particularly given the sporadic public transport in many parts of rural Britain, I believe firmly that we need to cycle more and that cycling should be encouraged. Even a short trip saves money on fuel, which is a big expense for those who make their lives in rural Britain, and if we take advantage of cycle paths and cut-throughs, cycling is sometimes quicker than taking the car anyway. Everyone who cycles instead of using their car is of course doing their bit for the environment by saving the emissions that would have otherwise resulted from their trip.

I sought this debate not just to pontificate on the benefits of cycling, of which my hon. Friend the Minister is no doubt well aware, but to draw attention to the good work that has been done in Lincolnshire, which I believe serves as a good example to help other areas, and to gain the Minister’s assurance that the Government will continue to do what they can to help what we do in Lincolnshire be rolled out as best practice across the country.

Lincolnshire County Council’s vision is to get more Lincolnshire residents cycling more frequently, and to get visitors to the county to use their bikes. The county council is aware that encouraging people to cycle is about a lot more than getting bums on cycle seats; it is about creating a safe environment for people to enjoy cycling and providing the facilities that will enable them to do so. I am glad that LCC recognises that cycling can boost our local economy and contribute to sustainable economic growth through the expansion of tourism, and thereby help local business. Cycling also contributes to everyone’s quality of life by reducing traffic congestion on arterial routes and in city centres, which can be a real problem for residents and visitors alike, particularly in North Hykeham, and reduces both greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution. LCC also knows, as we all do, that more cycling means more physical activity, which improves both mental health and physical wellbeing and reduces the strain on our national health service.
If we are to get more people out cycling, we must ensure that roads are safe to travel on. Many people are discouraged from using their bikes or permitting their children to use their bikes by the fear of road accidents. I have received in my postbag several examples of keen cyclists who have had near misses and other safety problems while out and about. I pay tribute to Lincolnshire Road Safety Partnership, which does valuable work, particularly with the schools in my constituency. It is vital that cyclists know the rules of the road and how to cycle safely, for the sake of both them and other road users and pedestrians. I therefore warmly welcome the delivery of 8,000 cycle training places each year in Lincolnshire schools, as well as adult cycle training through the Bikeability scheme. I would be grateful if the Minister would comment on the Government’s plans to support such programmes not just in Lincolnshire but across the country, to improve cycling proficiency. I suspect that we all remember doing the cycling proficiency certificate when we were at primary school—I certainly do—and that is incredibly important.

Lincolnshire has taken advantage of various sources of funding to improve opportunities for cycling in the county. For example, the Greater Lincolnshire local enterprise partnership has funded schemes such as Go Skegness, I see that my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) is in his place, and that scheme is about an all-modes approach to travel in his area.

In the case of my constituency, I particularly want to praise Access LN6, which is now called Access Lincoln and was set up with a grant from the Government’s local sustainable transport fund. Since its inception in 2012, that initiative has encouraged businesses, residents and communities in North Hykeham, South Hykeham and Lincoln to travel sustainably, and it is a testament to the benefits of working to encourage people to think about how they travel as well as providing the necessary infrastructure and information for them to make a change. Infrastructure improvements have been delivered, providing lasting facilities such as the major new cycle path developments on Whisby Road, Station Road and Mill Lane, and the number of cyclists continues to increase. In fact, LCC tells me that the number of cyclists in the area has doubled, which I think we can all agree is wonderful news.

More holistically, Access Lincoln works to embed sustainable travel in the ethos of our local businesses by reviewing individual travel plans and working with networks such as Lincoln Business Improvement Group, Lincolnshire chamber of commerce and Grow LN6. The county council provides support through sustainable travel officers, who work directly with businesses to enable their staff to travel to work sustainably and encourage them to think about using public transport—and of course to think about cycling. That is a valuable part of encouraging people to get out of their cars and think about their travel choices, which we all want to see. I would like to see it spread to other parts of the country. Perhaps the Minister will comment on that.

I want to highlight the continuing success of Hirebike, a casual bike rental scheme in Lincoln. Bikes similar those that are available down here in London and are frequently known as “Boris bikes,” for reasons we all know, are available to rent across the city. Our scheme was launched in 2013 and bikes are now available at 19 docking stations in Lincoln and North Hykeham, with more expansion to come as a result of Department for Transport funding, for which I am extremely grateful to the Minister. Such schemes are invaluable in promoting casual cycling, offer a sustainable way for people to get around, and employ local people. What is the Department doing to encourage and support similar schemes not just in Lincoln and London but across the entire United Kingdom?

Matt Warman (Boston and Skegness) (Con): Does my hon. and learned Friend agree that as we go forward with redeveloping Skegness railway station, that would be an ideal site for a bike hire scheme of the sort that he talks about? We could develop an integrated transport hub that would allow the many hundreds of thousands of tourists who visit Skegness each year to travel around sustainably and safely and see even more of our lovely county.

Stephen Phillips: Of course I agree, but my hon. Friend should push his ambitions a little further. He does not just need one docking station by Skegness station, he needs them all over Skegness. If the Minister is amenable to that proposal and will fund my hon. Friend to get some bikes in Skegness, I would quite like some in Sleaford and some other places in my constituency, and I would like more docking stations in North Hykeham, please.

I know that the Government take cycling seriously, and I am encouraged by the fact that spending on cycling across England has trebled from £2 a head to £6 a head since the Conservative party came to office in 2010. I welcome the commitment to a cycling and walking investment strategy and the announcement in last autumn’s spending review of £300 million of investment all the way out to 2020. The Government’s role is to create the right policy and funding environment to deliver change, and I would be grateful for an assurance from the Minister that his Department will continue to provide such support. I very much hope that other local authorities will show the same initiative as Lincolnshire, because only in that way will the benefits of cycling—the mental health improvements, the physical health improvements, the reductions in carbon emissions and the way it just makes us a better nation—be realised. I hope that is the message that the Minister will take away from the debate.
I would like to reinforce and support the arguments that my hon. and learned Friend made for cycling. It brings benefits in tourism and brings customers to businesses, not just in Lincolnshire but all over the country. Cycling is a great way to tackle the nation’s inactivity levels and improve economic growth. Above all, it is a sustainable and enjoyable way to travel and reduce travel costs.

The Government have an ambition to put cycling at the heart of our nation. We want to become a cycling nation. Our objective is to double cycling rates. Our vision is of streets and public places that support cycling and a road network where infrastructure for cycling is always considered when local and national routes are maintained, upgraded or built.

I am sure Lincolnshire is a wonderful county for cycling, partly because, as someone who is nearby but not too nearby, my perception is that it is relatively flat. For those of us who perhaps are not the fittest—people like me—that is quite a help.

**Stephen Phillips:** Will the Minister give way on that point?

**Andrew Jones:** Of course, though hopefully not on my fitness.

**Stephen Phillips:** I am sorry, but I cannot let that go. I live in a village called Thorpe on the Hill, and it is called that for a reason. I also have something called “the cliff” that runs down the middle of my village. I would not want people to think that we do not have big skies and big, open areas in which they can cycle in Lincolnshire, but if they are also interested in a bit of exercise I can certainly point them to some hills, including Harmston hill, which I have to say completely kills me.

**Andrew Jones:** I suspect my hon. and learned Friend’s fitness levels are way ahead of mine. He makes a valuable point. He has mentioned in both his opening remarks and his intervention the Lincolnshire landscape, and particularly the big skies that one experiences. I have certainly noticed that on all my visits to Lincolnshire.

Last year, the Government awarded half a million pounds for sustainable travel in Lincolnshire through the sustainable travel transition year fund. We also made similar awards to North Lincolnshire Council and North East Lincolnshire Council. Improvements such as the Canwick Road scheme were made possible by a contribution of more £1.5 million in funding from the DfT, which was put towards the £5 million overall cost of the project. Such developments ease congestion as well as providing improved facilities for pedestrians and cyclists.

In addition, Access Lincoln, Lincolnshire County Council’s framework for sustainable travel, will build on the success of Access LN6 by continuing to encourage people to walk, cycle, use public transport and car-share, as well as supporting key infrastructure projects in the city of Lincoln. Through our cycle rail grant, the Government have provided £360,000 for an innovative new cycle hub at Lincoln station. The hub will provide more than 200 new secure cycle parking spaces, making it easier and more convenient for people to cycle to the station. My hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) said he wishes to see that extended into his area. I can only agree with him on the merits of such schemes, and I wish him every success. I know he is already discussing that with the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Cleveleys (Paul Maynard). Where we have seen schemes developed, they have been successful, and I would like to see that success extended across the country.

With funding from the Department contributing to the success, Lincolnshire has made improvements to its infrastructure and made people’s experience of cycling more enjoyable. However, despite those good examples there is much more we will have to do if we are going to make this a cycling nation.

On 27 March we published the first draft cycling and walking investment strategy for public consultation. We had a fantastic response to it, with about 3,600 responses received, and more than 400 individuals attended engagement workshops around the country, highlighting the terrific appetite for cycling and walking. The draft strategy sets out our plans for creating a cycling and walking nation, with an ambition up to 2040 for making cycling and walking the natural choice for short journeys or as part of a longer journey. It includes a target to double cycling and a number of objectives to increase cycling and walking and reduce the rates of cyclists killed or seriously injured, and it explains the financial resources available in the spending period to support the delivery of the objectives.

The draft strategy also sets out the actions to be taken to achieve our objectives under three broad themes: better safety, better streets and better mobility. I emphasise the key point that we cannot achieve these objectives alone. Our ambition will be delivered only if we work with local government, businesses, charities and the public. We want to support local delivery partners to do what they do best: identify and deliver individual, tailored cycling and walking interventions that are right for their areas. I think that was a key point made by my hon. and learned Friend about the progress made in Lincolnshire and that is exactly how we see progress being made across the country.

The Government have a role to play. We will take a lead on issues that require a national approach such as setting the framework and sharing knowledge and good practice. We will publish the final cycling and walking investment strategy once all considerations have been taken into account.

We have to look at funding as a part of this issue, because obviously that is important to help to facilitate change. We have made good progress. In 2010, for every person in England, just £2 was spent supporting cycling. That has gone up to £6 per person each year across England, and it is more than £10 per person in London and our eight cycling ambition cities, which include Birmingham.

**Stephen Phillips:** The Minister champions the fact that London is getting £10 a head and the rest of the country is getting £6 a head. I have to say that, not just in relation to cycling but in relation to everything, those of us who make our lives in rural Britain feel that we are constantly short-changed, because the money goes into the urban centres and not into our communities. I want his agreement that it is just not fair that the good folk of Lincolnshire will get £6 a head in this Parliament whereas...
the no doubt equally good folk of London, Birmingham and all these other places will get £10. It is not on, and it has to stop.

Andrew Jones: It is a question not of reducing funding in other areas but of improving the funding position right across the country. I share my hon. and learned Friend’s argument about how transport has been weighted towards the south-east—I represent a constituency further north than his own. The idea that transport issues exist only in the south of England is obviously nonsense that has to be corrected. That of course is one of the objectives of the Government’s spending programme, whether in High Speed 2, the road investment strategy or the control period 5 delivery plan—all such things are about injecting capacity. We have to address the significant regional imbalance.

That is not to say that I do not recognise that London has specific challenges because of its scale. It clearly has, but it is not unique in having transport challenges and those of rural areas are frequently overlooked. My hon. and learned Friend makes a valuable point and I agree with his underlying argument.

I think we have seen good progress with the cycling ambition cities, but I do not want progress to be only in small parts of our country. The spending review in 2015 included £580 million for a new access fund for sustainable transport, with £80 million of revenue funding and £500 million of capital as part of the local growth fund. That will build on the legacy of the local sustainable transport fund and its success in supporting sustainable travel to work as well as supporting the cycling and walking investment strategy. Following a competitive bidding process, we hope to be able to announce the winners of the current access fund applications later this year, by Christmas.

More than £200 million has been allocated to the cycling ambition cities, which are making progress with the delivery of cycling networks, including Dutch-style segregated cycle lanes in Cambridge, new strategic routes in Greater Manchester and a cycle superhighway in the north-east. That group meet regularly to share their experiences and learning, and I want to capture some of those and make all of that information available so that we can help to share good practice. Part of our role in Government is to pull together what good practice looks like, and encourage those with local responsibility.

That is already happening in, for example, the shared space initiative; it is all about supporting local authorities in their work.

My hon. and learned Friend emphasised safety, which is obviously critical. There are still far too many people losing their lives or being seriously injured on the roads. As the Minister for road safety I am acutely aware that every life lost is a family shattered. We will do all that we can to improve the safety performance of our roads. To put things in context, ours are among the safest roads in the world. Last year was the second best year for road safety in our history, in terms of lives lost. Obviously, we want to build on that and go further, and that certainly includes cycling. I remember learning awareness and the law of the road, and how to use a bike, when I was quite small, at primary school. Bikeability is the Government’s national training programme, designed to give people the skills and confidence to cycle safely and competently on today’s modern roads. It has delivered approximately 1.9 million training places across the country since it began in 2007. We have secured a financial settlement for the next few years. My hon. and learned Friend asked for a commitment that it will continue and I am able to give him that. The funding has been secured; we have £50 million in the spending review and we expect to train a further 1 million children over the next four years.

Importantly, my hon. and learned Friend highlighted the good work being done in Lincolnshire, especially in relation to routes to school. We want to encourage children to be able to ride to school; but before that can happen, addressing parents’ natural concerns is fundamental. That is not, of course, a single initiative. We want to encourage cycling right across the transport mix. Highways England, which is responsible for the nation’s strategic roads, launched its cycling strategy in January. It outlined plans to provide a safer, integrated, more accessible strategic road network for cyclists and other vulnerable road users. It will invest £100 million in 200 cycling schemes between now and 2021.

The issue is not only funding, although that is obviously important. My Department is committed to ensuring that good cycling infrastructure is in place across the country. London has been mentioned, and there has been good progress there; but it is not just a London issue. We want to share the lessons across the country so that everyone benefits from the experience. The cycle proofing working group, which does not have the catchiest title in Government, was set up in 2013, and consists of experts from across the sector, who share knowledge, conduct research, promote good practice, and advise on cycle proofing standards to help support those with responsibility for designing and building infrastructure on a local basis. The Department has recently published case studies designed to help local authorities with the design and delivery of cycling provision.

We fully support devolution and decentralisation. It has of course been a running theme throughout this Government: the idea that local areas best know their needs and problems, and their solutions, seems self-evident to almost all Conservatives, but it has not necessarily been a feature of Government policy over the years. We are providing more capital for local infrastructure than ever before, particularly through the local growth fund. If anyone thinks that that is bad news for walking and cycling, they should reconsider. Forward-thinking local enterprise partnerships such as Greater Lincolnshire know perfectly well the value and the economic benefits that cycling can bring. We know that, because they have allocated more than £270 million to cycling infrastructure projects over the next five years.

Some of the benefits of that investment are beginning to be seen in Lincolnshire. The Go Skegness scheme has been mentioned. That project has started on site, and will transform public transport and cycling accessibility in and around Skegness. There has been a 77% increase in the number of cyclists on the Station Road cycle way, which is a key route in North Hykeham; that is fantastic. My hon. and learned Friend mentioned the Hirebike casual rental scheme in Lincoln; bikes are available to rent across the city. It was launched only three years ago in 2013, and 100 bikes are now available to rent. My hon. and learned Friend mentioned the imminent expansion
and the ways in which the Department seeks to support it. The extension includes electric bikes, an interesting part of the marketplace that has made much more progress in other European countries than in the UK. I think they are likely to be a feature of the marketplace in time ahead; it may be an encouragement to participation in cycling for softies such as me.

I am trying to convey an impression of the many different ways in which the Government are committed to cycling. It is not our role to dictate what local areas spend their money on; they know themselves better than Government could, and our role is to support them by undertaking research, providing information and advice, and encouraging and promoting their work. We have been getting the message out, and it is clearly working and getting through. In future we shall go further with devolution deals, which will, I think, include more consolidated local funding pots. We will go further in supporting local bodies to create high quality local plans for cycling and walking.

We are very ambitious about making good progress with cycling, for health, environmental and transport reasons. There are not many things in this world that are fun, good for the environment, and good for us too; but cycling is one of those things. Our cycling and walking investment strategy is the first phase of a longer term process of transformational change to make this truly a cycling nation. It has been great to hear about the progress made locally in Lincolnshire, in my hon. and learned Friend’s constituency and others. He asked specifically for an undertaking that the Government will continue to support cycling, and I give him that: yes, they will. They will continue to support it financially, through publicity and the sharing of good practice. We view cycling and walking as being at the heart of our transport mix. I hope that the progress made in Lincolnshire will extend across the country, because it is exactly what we need.

11.27 am

Stephen Phillips: I am extraordinarily grateful to my hon. Friend, not only for his constructive response but for his assurances on my specific queries. I am immensely pleased to hear those assurances, as, I am sure, are my hon. Friends the Members for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman) and for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins). I know from discussions with the latter that she knows the importance of cycling in her constituency, not only for the reasons covered in the debate but also in relation to regeneration.

Victoria Atkins (Louth and Horncastle) (Con): I thank my hon. and learned Friend for securing this important debate. He will know that the Louth canal was, in its heyday, the powerhouse of the midlands engine—even bigger than Grimsby’s port, in its time. Does he welcome, as I do, the work of East Lindsey District Council, the Louth Navigation Trust and Sustrans to reopen the route along the canal for cycling, walking and other joyous pursuits?

Stephen Phillips: Yes, of course I agree with my hon. Friend fully about that. I am looking forward to cycling the route and, indeed, dragging her along with me, when it opens in due course. I am afraid that the price of being permitted to make her point in the debate will be that she will have to join me.

We have had an extraordinarily useful debate. Those who read it in Hansard will be left in no doubt about the beauty of Lincolnshire, and the fact that it may be the best county in the United Kingdom in which to engage in cycling pursuits. I can promise those who come that not only will they get a good bike ride; they will get fabulous lunches in some of the wonderful pubs and other places of Sleaford and North Hykeham—and, I am sure, Boston and Skegness and Louth and Horncastle.

I am grateful to the Minister and to everyone who contributed to the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.
European Medicines Agency

[Mr Steve McCabe in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the future of the European Medicines Agency.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I am grateful for the opportunity to secure the debate, which I called with the expectation of being answered by a Minister from the Department for Exiting the European Union. It is unclear to me why that is not happening; perhaps that could be No. 171 on our list of questions about Brexit. None the less, I am sure we can expect a robust and helpful response from the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Warrington South (David Mowat), who perhaps can explain that to us.

I start by laying my cards on the table. I am old enough to remember the John Major Government and the Maastricht treaty; I was perhaps one of the few at that time who actually read it. I also remember the troubles that the then Prime Minister had. Despite those difficult times, one of his major achievements was to secure the location of the European Medicines Agency in the United Kingdom. More than 20 years on, that success by a Conservative Prime Minister is being put at risk by the foolish path being pursued by the Conservative Government today. John Major famously referred to some of his colleagues—I apologise for this, Mr McCabe—as “bastards”; now they are running the show.

Last week, the Chancellor wryly commented that no one voted for Brexit to make us poorer. I wonder how many knew about the potential impact on one of our key industries, the future of which we are discussing today. My guess is that very few knew that very few were voting to destroy British jobs and to do reckless damage to one of our great success stories. The area of the country I represent is a world leader in pharmaceuticals and life sciences. The Cambridge biomedical campus is at the pinnacle of international research, with, just a few years ago, AstraZeneca choosing Cambridge as its location rather than elsewhere in the world—but that was before 23 June.

Given that the vast majority know nothing of all this, let us set out some of the details about the European Medicines Agency and the significant role it has played over the past two decades in providing a harmonised approach to medicines regulation throughout the European Union. It was set up in 1995 from predecessor organisations, is a decentralised agency of the European Union and is located in London. Its mission is “to foster scientific excellence in the evaluation and supervision of medicines, for the benefit of public and animal health in the European Union”.

Responsible for the scientific evaluation of human and veterinary medicines developed by pharmaceutical companies for use in the European Union, it can grant marketing authorisations for medicines that allow for their use across the 28 EU member states, as well as the countries of the European economic area—Iceland, Liechtenstein and Norway.

The EMA describes its four main functions as to facilitate development and access to medicines, to evaluate applications for marketing authorisation, to monitor the safety of medicines across their life cycle and to provide information to healthcare professionals and patients. Essentially, it is tasked with ensuring all medicines available on the EU market are safe, effective and of high quality, and it seeks to harmonise the work of existing national medicine regulatory bodies, such as the UK’s Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency. It serves a market of more than 500 million people living in the European Union and covers a market of 25% of global pharmaceutical sales, of which the UK constitutes just 3%.

We should understand the EMA in the context of the growing global pharmaceutical market and the UK’s world-leading life sciences sector. The Prime Minister herself said in July:

“It is hard to think of an industry of greater strategic importance to Britain than its pharmaceutical industry”. Indeed, the life sciences sector in our country has a turnover of more than £60 billion per year and generates exports worth £30 billion. In 2014 it invested £4 billion in research and development—more than any other sector. It employs 220,000 people in our country and 25% of the world’s top prescription medicines were discovered and developed in the United Kingdom. In my constituency of Cambridge alone, there are more than 160 life science companies reinforcing the strong local knowledge economy, and contributing to the economy well outside my region as well.

In passing, it is perhaps worth noting that Cambridge is one of just a handful of UK cities making a net contribution to the UK Treasury, thanks in no small part to its vibrant life sciences industry. Thus, the Cambridge view on how we secure future prosperity may perhaps be worth listening to. Cambridge, and those in this key sector, are most certainly unhappy with the current route being taken for a range of reasons and the future of the EMA is a good example. What will be its future, post-Brexit? What will be the impact on the future of our country’s life sciences industry more generally? What will be the real impact on the NHS—the real impact, not the bus slogan? The head of NHS England, Simon Stevens, has rightly insisted that the regulation of medicines and devices must be considered during the Brexit negotiations.

What are the options? As I have noted, countries inside the European economic area are included within the EMAs centralised marketing authorisation procedure, which means that, if the UK remains part of the economic area, the process for regulating and supplying medicines in our country might see little change, which could bring stability for the sector.

Nick Thomas-Symonds (Torfaen) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. My concern is that, outside the European Union, we will be in a position in which pharmaceutical companies will have to go to the EMA to go through the process to make the drugs available, and subsequently have to do the same thing for the purposes of UK law, which will cause delay. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important that we have parallel processes so that there is no disadvantage to patients in this country?
Daniel Zeichner: My hon. Friend pre-empts the points that I will move on to. The issue of delay is really important.

I was talking about the option of staying within the European economic area. Sadly, from what we are hearing, and from what is possibly happening in the Chamber at this very moment, that is an option the Government do not seem to be entertaining. If we do not, pharmaceutical companies might have to apply separately to the UK’s MHRA if they want to supply a drug in the UK, as my hon. Friend has pointed out. Most commentators predict that that is likely to lead to a slower, less efficient regulatory process.

The Association of Medical Research Charities has pointed out that the strong and aligned medicines regulation across the EU, underpinned by science, is essential to bringing new medicines to patients in a way that minimises delay and costs. At the weekend, the chief executive of AstraZeneca made exactly that point—that, without the EMA, NHS patients would get new drugs more slowly and drug costs to the NHS would rise, meaning less money for the NHS; not quite what was written on the bus. Perhaps the Minister will confirm that the Government believe that people voted for less money for the NHS. That is certainly not the general understanding.

There is also an associated worry that smaller biotech companies, the lifeblood of our future prosperity, which in many cases are pioneering revolutionary treatments, will lack the capacity to file multiple applications at once and to handle all the associated paperwork. Some will struggle on, and we wish them every success, but I fear others will go elsewhere, to our detriment.

The MHRA finds itself in a potentially difficult place. It has commented, carefully, in response to the referendum result:

“We will continue to work to the highest levels of excellence and quality, working with and supporting our customers, partners and stakeholders to protect health and improve lives. Working closely with government, we will consider the implications for the work of the Agency. We will continue to make a major contribution globally to improving public health through the effective regulation of medicines and medical devices, underpinned by science and research.”

Those words, and the intention behind them, are encouraging, if unsurprising, but the MHRA has been put in a difficult and uncertain position. No major member state has left the EU before, so there is no model to follow for disentangling the UK’s medicines and life science industry from the EMA. The EMA and the MHRA work symbiotically and their separation is likely to be complex. The MHRA may be left with a bigger workload, and pharmaceutical developers may well prioritise the much larger EU market and delay securing regulatory approval in the UK. Indeed, US and Japanese companies already file in their home markets first before seeking approval in the European economic area. The UK, with its much smaller market, will be in danger of being at the back of the queue.

As we have heard, the EMA has allowed UK patients faster access to new treatments. It is worth noting that, in Australia and Canada, where medicines are licensed nationally, patients have slower access. On average, new medicines come to market six to 12 months later than in the US and the European Union. It seems likely we will be in the same position. Is that really what people voted for—longer delays in getting life-saving treatments? Again, I seek the Minister’s view.

The damage is not only done to us. The BioIndustry Association warns that, without Britain, the European Medicines Agency could also end up losing out. It would sorely miss the MHRA’s strengths in patient safety regulation. The Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry has said that European colleagues are desperate for the MHRA to be retained as part of the regulatory process, owing to the high regard in which it is held. Both the ABPI and the Association of Medical Research Charities advocate ongoing regulatory co-operation between the EMA and the MHRA. The ABPI suggests that there is a strong rationale for seeking regulatory co-operation on the basis of the public health benefits to patients. The organisation says that strong, globally aligned medicines regulation has proven effective in bringing new medicines to patients quickly, without the additional costs of multiple regulatory systems. I believe we should do all we can to safeguard that.

The Government wrote in July that their renegotiation on the new European Union-United Kingdom relationship includes looking at the relationship between the UK and the EU medicines regulatory framework. I would appreciate an update on what they now believe that new relationship might look like and whether regulatory co-operation might still be possible.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful case. These points were raised with the Select Committee on Health in the run-up to the referendum. Will he join me in calling for people to submit further evidence to the Health Committee, now that we have launched our inquiry into what the Government’s priorities should be during their negotiations on the terms of our withdrawal?

Daniel Zeichner: I thank the Chair of the Health Committee for her intervention. I certainly encourage those in my area and others to take up that offer. We will be doing so.

Let me come to the most tangible issue of all: the future physical location of the European Medicines Agency. Just last month, the Government said in a written answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne):

“The future arrangements which apply in relation to European Union institutions based in the United Kingdom should be determined once the United Kingdom has left the EU. It is too early to speculate on the future location of the European Medicines Agency.”

Early or not, speculation is intense, and others are moving fast to gain advantage. The EMA stated in July that it “welcomes the interest expressed by some Member States to host the Agency in future”, while stressing that the decision will be taken “by common agreement among the representatives of the Member States.”

Various member states are already vying to host the EMA. The Danish Prime Minister has said he is looking at it. The Irish Health Minister has said that attracting the EMA to Dublin is one of the “more interesting” opportunities afforded by Brexit. Italy, Sweden and Spain are also reportedly expressing an interest.

The EMA employs some 900 people. What will happen to their jobs? Will those people move with the agency? Inevitably, there is concern that, should the EMA relocate
outside the UK, there will be a knock-on effect on the wider pharmaceuticals and life sciences industries. When they next decide where to locate and invest, does losing the EMA hinder or help? In my view, the answer is fairly clear, but I would welcome the Minister’s view.

We risk losing jobs. We risk losing influence. On a practical level, any company that sells to the European economic area has to have a qualified person for pharmacovigilance—an experienced, senior person based in the European economic area. If we are outside that area, QPPVs would have to move out of the UK or lose their jobs. There are 1,299 QPPVs currently in the UK. That is another potential loss, and of course, every highly-skilled job lost has a multiplier effect.

Perhaps the Minister can give us an estimate of how much all this will cost us. When I asked the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union that question in the House on Monday, he had no answer. I appreciate that the Minister, following the lead given by the Brexit Ministers, is unlikely to be able to provide detailed, concrete information at this stage. I have some sympathy; if you do not have a plan, it is probably best to say as little as possible. However, I hope that the Government understand just how important it is for the UK to retain the closest relationship possible with the European Medicines Agency. It is important for patients. It is important for businesses. It is important for innovation, and it is important for our economy as a whole.

2.44 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate on a matter of great importance. May I congratulate the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) on securing it? As my party’s health spokesperson in Westminster, I have been contacted by pharmaceutical companies about this issue, and I will try to illustrate their concerns in the short time I have.

It was not difficult to predict the tone—I mean this respectfully—of those who are presenting a particular case about the EMA, given their concerns in relation to Brexit. I have a great deal of respect for Members’ opinions on Brexit, and while we must remember that the vote of each Member carries the same weight, I gently remind the House that the die is cast. The people have spoken, and the responsibility of ensuring that we are in the strongest possible position now lies with this House.

I very much welcome this important debate. It is interesting that while we are having this discussion in Westminster Hall, the main Chamber of the House is discussing parliamentary scrutiny of the UK leaving the EU. No doubt this issue will be brought up there. The EMA is one of the mountain of details that the Government must be aware of and plan for when we enter into negotiations for leaving the EU and establishing mutually beneficial trade agreements. The hon. Member for Cambridge set the scene clearly, and although we have different opinions on Europe and Brexit, I do not see any difference in what we are trying to achieve collectively on this issue. Our opinions, focuses and goals are similar, if not exactly the same. That is important.

I will begin with the statement made by the EMA after the referendum result in June. It made it clear that its work will continue as normal. As there is no precedent for a member state leaving the EU, the implications for the location and operation of the EMA are unknown. The EMA also stated that any decision about the location of the agency’s headquarters would be made by common agreement among member states.

The Brexit negotiation team—the Secretaries of State for Exiting the European Union, for International Trade and for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, and the Prime Minister—will need information to set out a strategy for dealing with this issue. The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union and his team need the thoughtful consideration of those with an insight into this matter, so that they can strike the right way forward. It is important that we do that.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The helpful debate pack we have from the Library indicates that the pharmaceuticals sector has unfortunately declined as a percentage of the economy in the past five or six years, when we have been in the EU. Does my hon. Friend agree that the outlook of every hon. Member, Member, and throughout society in the UK, should be that we need to redouble our efforts to ensure that the line on that graph begins to go up, rather than continuing to decline?

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for his comment. I was not aware until seeing the briefing pack that there had been a decrease in the pharmaceutical business over the past few years; I actually thought we were holding our own and moving forward. Brexit will give us the opportunity to move forward, so we should look positively upon where we are.

This debate is not simply an opportunity for remainers to highlight something that may be difficult to negotiate, with no desire other than to prove their opinion on Europe. There is nothing wrong with that—people have different opinions—but let us work together to ensure that we deliver.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): Is it not possible that part of the reason why the pharmaceutical industry has gone down is that the clinical trials directive of 2001 was very bureaucratic? Following that, we had a fall of one quarter in trial research in the UK, particularly in oncology. That directive is due to be replaced in 2018 with the EMAs new regulation, which will streamline it.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention and the knowledge she brings to this Chamber and the House. I hope that we can improve on what she refers to when we get into the Brexit negotiations, and through our negotiations outside Europe when article 50 is triggered next year.

Let us work together to allow the EMA and the MHRA to come to an arrangement to continue what has been a great partnership to date and has achieved many results. According to the Financial Times, the EMA outsources up to a third of its work to the MHRA, and that work is responsible for a third of the MHRA’s income. A report in The BMJ states that that work makes the UK an attractive location to carry out clinical trials. The hon. Lady outlined that in her intervention, and I know that the Minister will respond and the shadow Front-Bench spokesman will add his comments.
That relationship, which has been proven to work, does not have to die because the EMA may— I emphasise “may” — move its headquarters. Work must be undertaken to underline the fact that although we will not be in the EU, we will remain the best in Europe at this type of clinical work. We have many things to be thankful for in our experience of it. We all understand the red tape in Europe, and I find it very hard to believe that the only reason why the work was outsourced to the MHRA was the location of the EMA.

Jo Churchill (Bury St Edmunds) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I want to return to the point made by the hon. Members for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) and for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford). The Government need to be aware of the connectivity between the university sector, the clinical trials sector, the pharmaceutical sector and beyond, and of the importance of where the EMA sits in that. I would be grateful for an assurance from the Minister that we are putting everything we can into ensuring that the situation is sorted effectively and quickly.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention and for the knowledge she brings to these debates. She is right in saying that we want a continuation of the good work with universities. Queen’s University Belfast has a partnership with pharmaceutical companies throughout the world, doing clinical trials and marvellous work, as do many other universities across the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We could do that even better, and we should be doing so.

It was because of the quality of service and the tendering process that we showed that this was the best place for the work to be carried out, and that will remain so no matter where the EMA locates its headquarters. I cannot blame the Republic of Ireland and other countries for putting down a marker that their country could be the home of the EMA when it is time for it to move. If this were an opportunity for business in my constituency, I would also be highlighting our ability to take the business on board. However, panic stations need not be manned tomorrow, because those countries are hoping that an opportunity will arise when we leave in the not-too-distant future.

It is clear that countries that are members of the EEA are covered by the EMA and have access to the centralised marketing authorisation procedure. That is important, as it may mean that the UK could continue to have that procedure after leaving the EU, but it will depend on the negotiations and the UK’s resulting position in the single market. If the UK did not become a member of the EEA, pharmaceutical companies would need to apply separately for marketing authorisations from the MHRA for a medicine they wished to supply in the UK. That will be covered the negotiations.

We must have faith in the negotiations and in those who have been tasked with the job. Let us support the Ministers who have been given that job and encourage them to move forward. I hope they will read the Hansard report of this debate. We are not in the main Chamber, but the contributions made here are important in formulating policy and moving forward.

I have been contacted by Muscular Dystrophy UK, which has asked me to ask some questions of those who will enter the negotiations so that they are recorded in Hansard. I am happy to do so. Will the Government ensure that there is a parallel approval system for new treatments, so that after the UK exits the EU, EMA approvals that are granted apply to the UK at the same time? Will the Government increase the capacity of the MHRA and the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence so that the regulatory and approval processes are faster and can cope with the growing number of emerging treatments for rare diseases in forthcoming years? It is important to underline the issue of rare diseases—I think every hon. Member in the Chamber has spoken about it at some point. We are all aware of the need for medicines, investigations and work to find new medicines to heal people better.

Those questions need to be considered, and a constructive approach that accepts there will be a change and seeks to influence the way the change takes place is the best way forward as we begin to work on the details that will shape our new position in Europe outside the EU. Let us focus on that.

I am nothing if not a realist, and my decision to support Brexit was not made on a whim or through emotion. It was made after thoughtful consideration that on the whole, we can do better for our country than the way things stand. That will come about through massive change and an overhaul of systems, and this is one of the changes that must happen. The onus is now on the Government, and particularly the team that is working on the negotiations, to ensure that we address the matter and gain the best possible outcome. I thank the hon. Member for Cambridge for giving us the chance to make a contribution to finding the way forward and highlighting the work that must be done to ensure that our MHRA, and indeed our system for clinical trials, continues to encourage work to be carried out here. We need to cement partnerships so that we can make the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland a better place for pharmaceutical companies.

2.56 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) for securing this important and timely debate. I am aware of how important academic and medical research is to his constituencies and his constituency. I am also aware of the standing that the work done in Cambridge gives to the United Kingdom on a global stage. Given our current state of political uncertainty, I thank him for all the work he is doing in this area.

Some hon. Members will know that I worked as a biochemist in the National Health Service for 33 years before being elected to serve as the MP for Heywood and Middleton. Medical research and innovation have been at the very heart of my professional career, working and collaborating with others from across the world here in the UK to focus on improving the quality of patient care. Like other hon. Members, I respect and will uphold the decision of the referendum on 23 June that the British public wish to leave the European Union, but I will continue to argue that our leaving does not mean isolation from the European Union.

We must not become isolated from world-leading medical and academic research or from collaborative innovation on life-saving medicines. We must reject isolation from funding and economic prosperity. We must ensure we are not isolated from regulatory safeguards or from providing our citizens and patients with the best quality of life and healthcare. Isolation in medical
[Liz McInnes]
terminology denotes a hospital or ward for patients with contagious or infectious diseases. We should not isolate or quarantine ourselves and become, in effect, the sick man of Europe. Keeping institutions such as the European Medicines Agency is key to the future of British science and medicine, and to accelerated access to treatments for patients in the UK.

As a representative of a north-west England constituency, I know just how important the pharmaceutical industry is, not only in providing life-saving drugs, but in providing high-skilled training and jobs. Greater Manchester has the most pharmaceutical employees of any region with just over 6,000 workers, totalling 18% of the total jobs in this industry across the UK. The pharmaceutical market in the EU as a whole employs 700,000 people. Every job in the pharmaceutical industry creates three to four more jobs through indirect employment.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on medical research, I know how imperative enabling timely patient access to new medicines is and how it plays a vital role in supporting the development of medicines for the benefit of patients, based on a comprehensive scientific evaluation of data and procedural clinical testing. The EMA does that by developing guidelines and setting standards, while co-ordinating the rigorous monitoring of pharmaceutical companies’ compliance with their pharmacovigilance obligations. It provides comprehensive information for the public on the safety of medicines and co-operates extensively with external parties—in particular, representatives of patients and healthcare professionals. The proposed great repeal Bill should ensure that all those aspects are preserved in UK law and harmonised with EU legislation and directives. Let us take, for example, Cancer Research UK, which directly funds more than 200 clinical trials, 28% of which involve at least one other EU country. Any change to EU legislation would put those pan-EU trials at risk.

The EMA has achieved notable and substantial advancements in its field, recommending approximately 1,000 medicines to the European Commission for a marketing authorisation for all EU member states. Those medicines benefit patients suffering from all types of diseases, including cancer, diabetes, neurological disorders, infectious diseases and auto-immune disorders. The EMA has also excelled in specialised areas such as medicines for rare diseases, medicines for children and advanced-therapy medicines. It has built a broad access to clinical data, allowing shared knowledge to be applied in future research, and has thus increased the efficiency of the development of medicines.

Of course, behind all those achievements are people. We have a duty to give reassurance immediately to the staff of the EMA. Of its 890 employees, 93% were born outside the UK. We must clarify that they will be able to continue to live and work in the UK; indeed, we must strive to end the uncertainty that so many of these workers are feeling at the moment. Although the complexities of this matter and the wider issues that this debate raises cannot be confined to a soundbite or a sentence, some of the language and tone on immigration during the past few weeks has been regrettably toxic. The French microbiologist Louis Pasteur said: “Science knows no country”. In that spirit, I advocate the positives of not only immigration, but innovation. The two are inherently intertwined in the scientific and healthcare community.

Only last week, two British scientists, Duncan Haldane and Sir Fraser Stoddart, collected Nobel prizes for science. I congratulate them and their teams on those awards. Both those eminent British-born scientists have worked in the UK and abroad, and each of them warned that the risk of Brexit could mean “a big negative” for British science.

We must continue to foster scientific excellence post Brexit, full stop. Retaining the EMA here in London is essential to harbouring and cementing those values. The time for speculation is over. The Government proclaim that they want “a country that works for everyone”, but if they do not stand up now and speak up for the scientific community, they will end up creating a country that stands isolated from scientific research and innovation—a country that is neither welcoming nor working.

3.3 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr McCabe. I thank the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) for initiating this very important debate.

As we know, the European Medicines Agency is a decentralised agency of the European Union, employing about 890 people and located at Canary Wharf in London, which makes it the biggest EU operation in the region of 150 days, based on the examples of winning the Nobel prize for chemistry. The EMA’s work is not just about regulatory matters; it is also about providing data, allowing shared knowledge to be applied in future research, and has thus increased the efficiency of the development of medicines.

Of course, behind all those achievements are people. We have a duty to give reassurance immediately to the staff of the EMA. Of its 890 employees, 93% were born outside the UK. We must clarify that they will be able to continue to live and work in the UK; indeed, we must strive to end the uncertainty that so many of these workers are feeling at the moment. Although the complexities of this matter and the wider issues that this debate raises cannot be confined to a soundbite or a sentence, some of the language and tone on immigration during the past few weeks has been regrettably toxic. The French microbiologist Louis Pasteur said: “Science knows no country”. In that spirit, I advocate the positives of not only immigration, but innovation. The two are inherently intertwined in the scientific and healthcare community.

I thank the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) and Sir Fraser Stoddart, collected Nobel prizes for science. I congratulate them and their teams on those awards. Both those eminent British-born scientists have worked in the UK and abroad, and each of them warned that the risk of Brexit could mean “a big negative” for British science.

We must continue to foster scientific excellence post Brexit, full stop. Retaining the EMA here in London is essential to harbouring and cementing those values. The time for speculation is over. The Government proclaim that they want “a country that works for everyone”, but if they do not stand up now and speak up for the scientific community, they will end up creating a country that stands isolated from scientific research and innovation—a country that is neither welcoming nor working.

Of course, it is not just the staff who face the prospect of an expensive move. There are likely to be repercussions for the public purse and implications for medicine regulation. We know that currently more than one third—almost 40%, in fact—of EU drug approvals are outsourced to the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency, which clearly places significant reliance on that business for its income. Consequently, there will be a financial gap for the UK. I would be interested to hear from the Minister how the Government plan to plug that gap.

The complications are not just financial; there may well be implications for how medicines are regulated. We seem to be looking at a hard Brexit. If the UK does not become a member of the European economic area, marketing authorisations will be required from the MHRA for the UK. I am in no doubt that the implications of that will be less efficiency and possibly longer processes for obtaining authorisations in the EU and the UK, resulting—I fear—in innovative drugs taking longer to reach patients. Some industry leaders predict delays in the region of 150 days, based on the examples of Switzerland and Canada.

According to a piece that appeared in the Financial Times, when Sir Michael Rawlins, chair of the MHRA, was asked whether it would be able to take on all the extra work registering new drugs and medical devices that is currently carried out by the EMA, he said:
“Certainly not.” Considerable investment and recruitment would be required to re-establish it as a stand-alone national regulator.

The EMA is central to the harmonised approach to medicines regulation. Losing this mechanism would have huge implications for the way in which drugs and medicines are tested and marketed, with concerns already expressed by many in the pharmaceutical industry that leaving the EU will result in the UK losing out on some trials that might otherwise benefit patients, as we will no longer be part of that harmonised procedure. The pharma industry argues that the UK is involved in about 40% of all adult rare disease trials in the EU at present, but that would be undermined by a change of status. Some in the pharma industry argue that that would in itself reduce the importance of this country in the eyes of the global drug companies. Being outside the EU would mean that the UK was not part of the harmonised procedure and so might lose out on some trials that might otherwise benefit patients. Officials at the National Eczema Society say that they have been informed by two US companies that trials of new treatments will not take place in the UK in the event of Brexit.

Across the UK, the pharmaceutical industry will be dealt a hammer blow through the loss of the European Medicines Agency, which is crucial for attracting foreign investment. It is clear that international pharma companies like to be close to their regulators. Until now, the EMA has been an attraction for companies to locate their European headquarters in the UK. The Japanese Government recently published a report detailing consequences if requirements from UK-EU negotiations are not delivered. Many Japanese pharmaceutical companies operate in London because of the EMA’s location in London. The Japanese Government have said that the appeal of London as an environment for the development of pharmaceuticals would be lost, which could lead to a shift in the flow of research and development funds and personnel elsewhere.

Thanks to a reckless gamble with our membership of the EU, the UK now faces the prospect of losing being part of the EMA, which not only will mean patients losing out on pioneering and beneficial medical trials, but will leave a disastrous trail when the inevitable happens and it seeks to have its headquarters in the EU.

3.8 pm

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Mr McCabe. I, too, pay tribute to the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) for obtaining the debate and for such an excellent opening speech, which laid out many of the key issues that we face.

In my constituency there is GlaxoSmithKline, which produces the largest amount of one of the key antibiotics used across the world. It is natural that there are concerns in my constituency and in that business. It is slightly tragic that we are having both of the debates on this issue today, instead of prior to the June referendum. Perhaps a little more airing of what we gain from the EU might have been helpful. Forty years of describing the EU in terms of straight bananas and bureaucracy has not been helpful.

In health, we have had nothing but gains. The two canards that were raised during the debate—people ahead of you in the queue to see the GP and £350 million a week on the side of a bus—have evaporated. Someone is much more likely to be treated by an EU national than to be squeezed out of an appointment in a hospital.

We have had nothing but health gains. The EMA is typical of everything the EU has done in many areas. Before 1995—prior to expansion, so we would be talking about 12 countries—we faced regulation in multiple languages across multiple countries. What we have seen in the EU is the development of harmonisation of regulation to the point where we have a single agency. Having one agency means, as the hon. Member for Cambridge said, that drugs get from research bench to patients much more quickly. The EMA monitors safety throughout Europe so that we can more easily pick it up when, in real-life use, there turns out to be a problem with a drug. It also helps to direct research into the big challenges that the population of the EU faces.

There has been a lot of discussion about the MHRA. It is clear that there would need to be significant investment in it. Even if we are still in the EEA or in a position to be part of the EMA, we will not have any influence. The MHRA does not just provide briefs and reviews. It was massive in influencing the structure and principles of the EMA, and such influence will be lost. The loss of influence over pharmaceutical firms that are here has been talked about. The chief executive of the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry has said that he foresees a major loss of inward investment in this country because of the loss of the EMA headquarters in London and because of our possible exit from the EMA.

Many such examples will come up in different sectors with regard to Brexit, but the EMA encapsulates all of it. It is not a separate bureaucracy telling us what to do. Twenty-eight countries were working together to find the slickest way to encourage quicker research and to bring it to some benefit. Research is a big part of this. It has been possible for the EMA to direct research on the challenges that the whole of Europe faces, such as antimicrobial resistance or modern plagues such as Ebola. As was mentioned, it supports research into rare diseases. One pharmaceutical firm or one academic unit would not access enough patients to ever get an answer. Across a population of 500 million, we have the real potential—we are already seeing that potential come through—to find answers to some of the horrific illnesses suffered by small groups in a population. “Suffering” is the right word, and we will lose the potential to find solutions.

Lots of drug companies do not bother trialling drugs in children because it is just too much hassle. The EMA has been able to push and say, “We need to have paediatric trials. We need to have trials in children.” That dovetails with the business of research across the EU, which has the biggest research network in the world. It is much bigger than in China and the US. The UK has led in benefiting from that. We put in £5.5 billion and get £8.8 billion out. The biggest share of research of all types through Horizon 2020 and framework 7 has been done in this country, and we are in danger of losing that.

The reason we lead in pharmaceuticals is not just because the headquarters is here; it is because of the dovetailing between academia, pharmaceuticals and universities, and the ability of researchers to move around. We have gained because English has become the language...
of research and science, because of America. So that has been a benefit that we have had. Of course that is a benefit that we will keep, but we are in danger of sitting out on a little rock all by ourselves.

There may be a delay if pharmaceutical firms have to go through a separate process with the MHRA, but what about British firms? What about the innovative medicines initiative, which encourages small and medium-sized enterprises and often works on the biological aspects of new medicines? They will face an absolute nightmare trying to sell their drugs in Europe. That is something that we are not giving remotely enough attention to.

I was a remainer. I am still a remainer and my population were remainers. Obviously, we are not happy with the idea of being taken out of Europe and of being taken towards such a hard Brexit, as the rhetoric has suggested in the past month. We need to realise what we may lose. We still have everything to fight for. What “Brexit means Brexit” actually means can still make a huge difference to what we manage to hang on to from the EU and what we lose completely. We need to ensure that the people who are at the table take account of this.

I worry because we are describing the EU as a shop. We are talking only about the single market and whether we will get access. Sometimes people mean that as a shorthand for everything else we have gained, but that allows us to be mentally sloppy and therefore allows someone to say, “Oh, good. We are like Canada. We have got access to the single market. Job done.” But it is not job done. The EMA was an example of Europe coming together, streamlining itself and finding a better way forward.

It has been recognised that the clinical trials directive of 2001 made it very difficult for the UK because the system became quite bureaucratic. The EMA has responded to that. The vastly streamlined clinical trials regulation starts in 2018. In fact, the EMA and the EU in this sector are getting rid of bureaucracy and making it easier for our companies and our academics to do research throughout Europe. Some 80% of all the top flight research of all kinds is international and multinational. If we do not allow the researchers to easily work with each other, we are cutting our noses off to spite our faces. We need to recognise that Europe has not just been about burning orchards or straight bananas. It has brought us huge gains in health and safety, in research and in getting drugs to patients. I call on the Minister to bring us huge gains in health and safety, in research and science, because of America. So that has been a benefit that we have had. Of course that is a benefit that we will keep, but we are in danger of sitting out on a little rock all by ourselves.

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European landscape is portrayed. It is part of a collaborative exercise across 28 nations, which have been making real progress. She also set out the financial benefits that this country has received from membership, and highlighted the important point about the difficulty that some smaller British companies may face in exporting their innovations, if we do not get the terms of exit right.

We all remember the famous promise, which several hon. Members have referred to, that the Brexit vote would mean £350 million a week being spent on the NHS. It is fair to say that it is accepted that that figure does not stand up and was misleading, but, as the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire eloquently pointed out, I suspect very few people who voted leave would have appreciated the threat that leaving means to jobs in the science and research sector and to speedy access to new medicines.

No one blames the Department of Health for those misleading claims. Indeed, I know from my own parliamentary questions that Ministers sought legal advice about the use of the NHS logo by the leave campaign. However, we are entitled to ask for more from Ministers on the near total absence of work to prepare for the possibility of a leave vote. For example, on 11 July, I asked the Secretary of State what assessment he had made “of the potential effect on workforce numbers in the NHS of the UK withdrawing from the EU.” I was told that no such assessment had taken place. On 6 September I asked what discussions the Secretary of State had had with the Home Secretary “on the immigration status of NHS employees from other EU countries when the UK leaves the EU.”

I was told only that arrangements were being made for a meeting to take place at some point in the future. A similarly disappointing response from the Government on the issue was pointed out by my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge, who noted that when asked about the future physical location of the EMA the Minister responded that it was “too early to speculate”.

We are not asking the Government to speculate; speculation is happening whether we like it or not. We are asking them to set out some concrete and substantive detail on what they plan to do. We have heard many times from the Prime Minister the words “Brexit means Brexit”, and that she is not prepared to give a running commentary. But investment decisions are being made right now, and if we cannot begin to provide some certainty we shall quickly find out that the UK and, in particular, places such as Cambridge and Cheshire will miss out on investment. It is about time we got some clarity on the Government’s position.

The first and most obvious point is the location of the EMA. We have already heard that countries from around the world are queueing up to offer it a new home. Having heard the benefits that it brings we can understand why they are forming an orderly queue. I know that the Minister does not want to speculate on what will happen, but will he at least set out whether, as part of the negotiations, he will take steps to try to retain the EMA headquarters in London, if that is possible? Will he also provide clarity about what steps the Government will take, if the EMA does relocate, to safeguard the headquarters of major international pharmaceutical and life sciences companies?

Beyond the future location of the EMA, there are wider issues about how medicines will be regulated in future, which could not only have an impact on investment but affect how quickly new medicines reach UK patients. Various hon. Members have mentioned that. Will we be able to safeguard the UK’s position as one of the leading locations for clinical trials in Europe? Clearly, a lot of Members feel passionately about that. Will the Government guarantee that the UK will continue to adhere to the EU regulatory framework on the authorisation and conduct of clinical trials? What assurances can the Minister give us that retaining access to the centralised marketing authorisation procedure will be a key part of our Brexit negotiations? Will the Government seek to negotiate continued access for UK research institutions to the innovative medicines initiative and other EU-funded research and collaboration programmes?

If the UK is left in the position of developing a separate regulatory framework from the EU, not only will that make it a much less attractive place in which to develop, manufacture and launch new products; it could also signify the end of accelerated access to treatments for patients in the UK, putting us to the back of the queue when new medicines are developed. Patients in Australia and Canada, where medicines are licensed nationally, have a comparative delay of six to 12 months before new medicines come to market. For people with rare conditions that could mean the difference between life and death.

European co-operation also provides some key benefits in terms of patient safety. One example is the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, which assists in our response to communicable diseases and pandemics. Another is the co-operation that reduces the risk of falsified medicines reaching UK patients. Can the Minister confirm that we will seek to continue to co-operate with our neighbours on those crucial issues?

What assessment has been made of the impact of the EMA’s leaving on the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency? As the hon. Member for Strangford said, work from the EMA is a substantial source of income for the MHRA, accounting for up to a third of its income. What provision has the Department made for the potential shortfall, particularly if the MHRA will have more responsibilities in future? As the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire said, in any scenario, it is likely that the MHRA will require further investment. What provision has been made for that?

This has been a wide-ranging and well informed debate. While we recognise that the issue does not begin and end with the physical location of the EMA and the 900 staff based there, there are at the heart of it, as my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton said, 900 people—highly skilled and able to take their talents probably anywhere in the world—who face a future that is a vacuum. They will all have families and plans, and it is unrealistic to expect them to put their lives on hold for two or three years while things are sorted out.

I appreciate the Government’s reluctance to be drawn into making substantial commitments on the issues, but we run risks with respect to decisions about investment, future co-operation and, indeed, staff retention, if we do not begin to make our position clear. I hope that, when the Minister gets to his feet, we shall begin to get some certainty about the Government’s intentions as to
seeking regulatory co-operation and, most importantly, safeguarding future investment in the sectors that we have heard about today.

3.28 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr McCabe. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) and all the other hon. Members who have brought their experience to bear in the debate. I am sorry to disappoint everyone by not being from the Brexit Department. I will pass that on to those who are in it, but as has been noted, they are otherwise engaged in the main Chamber.

One reason why I am particularly pleased that we have had this debate today—I regret that all the answers may not be clear in 11 minutes’ time—is that often when there is talk in the media about the Brexit negotiations we are about to have, we hear a great deal about the importance of financial services, the City and passporting, and of the need to get those things right and the terrible effect it will have on our economy if we do not. The fact that we have had this debate, and that the hon. Gentleman and others have talked about how important the medicines industry is to our economy—not just in Cambridge, Cheshire or Scotland, but right across the country—is a reminder of the importance of this issue and has rightly put it on the agenda. I am sure the hon. Gentleman will keep it on the agenda, as will Ministers from the Department of Health.

At the start of the debate, the hon. Gentleman quoted the Prime Minister, who said:

“It is hard to think of an industry of greater strategic importance to Britain than its pharmaceutical industry”.

That is on the cover of a report, which I recommend everyone reads, on the structure and future of the life sciences industry post-Brexit. In a moment, I will talk a bit more about the work that the Office for Life Sciences is doing in that area. The pharmaceuticals industry is right at the centre point of where we need to be as a country in development work. It is an area that we are world-class in—an area of advanced manufacturing, which we need to be doing more of. We are leveraging the expertise and brilliant work in universities to actually make money, in a way that we do not do in all industries at all times. It is vital that we do not lose that.

I will repeat fairly quickly some of the statistics that we have heard on the structure of the industry. There are nearly 6,000 companies in the industry in the UK, and two of the major companies are GSK—located in many parts of the country, including Ayrshire—and AstraZeneca, which is located in Cambridge in particular. I have made the point earlier that a larger part of it was AstraZeneca, which is located in Cambridge in particular.

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However, this is not a European industry, it is a global industry. AstraZeneca and GSK also have massive facilities in places such as Sweden and Philadelphia—all over the world. Of course it is absolutely essential that we get our relationship with the EU right. I think the point was made earlier that we have 3% of the EU market in terms of sales, although we are a lot bigger than that in terms of drug production and the importance of the pharmaceutical industry—it is probably more like 10%. GSK’s recent announcement of an £800 million investment in biologic and bioelectronic activity is to be welcomed.

The EMA was formed, as was generously mentioned, in 1995. There are 890 staff, the majority of whom are not from the UK; I think that only something like 60 are UK-based. The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes) made the fair point that those people have families and futures, and asked how they are to be protected. The Prime Minister has said that we hope and expect that all EU nationals who work in the UK will stay here into the future. I have not heard any leader of any other country in Europe make the reciprocal point. I do not know if that is on the Labour party’s list of 171 questions, but it would be reasonable if it were. Having the EMA in the UK is of benefit to us not just because of those jobs but because, as Members have said, it is natural that people like to be close to their regulators. It would be reasonable to suppose that, although that might not be a decisive factor in many investment decisions, it would be a factor.

We also have the UK agencies: the MHRA, which covers medicines, and the Veterinary Medicines Directorate, which covers veterinary medical activities. They have 1,200 staff and 160 staff respectively. The point was made today that their activities are commingled with those of the EMA. Many of the EMA’s major committees are chaired by people from the UK, including from the MHRA and VMD. Equally importantly, the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) made the point that 30% of its activities are done by the MHRA. The figure I have is 20%, but nevertheless, a significant amount of work done for the EMA is done in the UK. That is not just because of location—it is not just because the people who do that work are down the road. It is because they have the expertise, the science base and the people that are needed. Of course, with Brexit, all of that is up for discussion.

We have touched on the university sector, and I will not say a great deal about that. I have already made the point that the industry is an example of us successfully taking a sector with world-class, world-beating innovation and turning that into world-class, world-beating companies, in a way that we do not everywhere. It is of paramount importance that the sort of research that goes on in our universities continues. The Government intend to make sure that happens and, indeed, to increase it.

I have set out the regulatory and industry structure, but we are just about to impose Brexit on all of that. That is where we get into the territory of speculation and conjecture, and I apologise that I cannot be more definitive. Many of the questions that have legitimately been raised, in particular by the Labour spokesman, the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders), will be central to any negotiation that the Government take part in. It is not possible for a Minister to address the House of Commons and say, “This is our position, these are our red lines, these are the things we are going to give a bit on and these are the things that really matter to us.” That would be nonsense. That is not how any of the commercial companies located in
Cambridge or other places would deal with things. What we have to do—this is the role of Members here today—is to make sure that the issues are raised with and understood by the negotiating team, because there will be trade-offs in any negotiation.

With respect to some of the Members who have spoken, I have to say that we do pay £20 billion a year to the EU. We may all vary in our view of how much value for money that provides, but the fact is the £350 million on the side of the bus was not an entirely made-up number. That did not influence how I voted in the referendum, but it was not an entirely made-up number. We pay £20 billion a year for the things that we get from the EU, one of which is the EMA and the activity around it. There is a dialogue to be had both on that amount of money and on issues such as the location of the EMA and all that goes with it. Of course, its location is one point to be discussed, and I have no idea how that will end up. The point has been made that it regulates not just for the EU but for Liechtenstein and Norway—I think there was another country as well, but I have not written it down. The UK could be another such country. For me to say it is an absolute line in the sand that the EMA must stay in the UK would be a nonsense.

A number of Members have asked what we are doing to prepare for the negotiations that will happen. That question can be divided into two parts: what are the agencies—the VMD and the MHRA—doing, and what are the Government doing? The agencies have set up groups looking at the opportunities and at how regulation might carry on into the future. A number of Members have made the point that there might be a time lag in medicines coming to the UK if they have to be regulated by more than one body, or if in the future the EMA does it separately from how we do it in the UK. That is really a decision for the UK. It is about how we choose to regulate, and that decision has not yet been made. It would be disappointing if that happened, and many of us will be working hard to ensure that it does not.

The Government have set out fairly clearly that we intend to underwrite EU payments to academic projects even after we have left the EU, to protect the important activity of research programmes. Through the Office for Life Sciences, we have set up a steering group charged with informing how we make the transition.

The group is chaired by the Secretary of State, Sir Andrew Witty and Pascal Soriot from AstraZeneca, and over the next few months it will be responsible for informing our negotiating position.

I do not know how many colleagues know about the report, “Maintaining and growing the UK’s world leading Life Sciences sector in the context of leaving the EU”. I think it was put together by PricewaterhouseCoopers. It is a good start in setting out a number of issues we have heard about today and the importance of getting the process right. I very much recommend it. It does not answer all the questions, but it sets out the issues in areas such as trade, people, research, funding and regulation.

A whole string of points were made in Members’ contributions this afternoon. I do not want to spend too long on them, but the hon. Member for Cambridge mentioned that not being part of the EMA’s marketing authorisation might cause delays. That depends on how we set up regulation in this country, and there are a lot of choices. A lot of other countries, including Switzerland and Japan, regulate in different ways, and it would be premature for me to say too much about it. The hon. Gentleman also made the valid point that the EMA and the MHRA are completely intermingled, and that both benefit from the current arrangements. It is not just about the EMA contracting and hiring the MHRA. We do a lot of the work that leads to that top-level and highly professional European legislation.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) reminded us that whatever we think, the country has voted and we are going to leave the EU. There is no ambiguity about that, and we have to make the most of it. That is a mature reflection, because it forces us to address the negotiations, and not to continue to go over what was on the side of the bus and all the rest of it. We are where we are, and we need to make the situation the best that it can be.

The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton used her experience and knowledge as a research scientist to make a good speech. She made a point about people, which I tried to answer by reflecting on other EU states. She mentioned the Nobel prize winners’ remarks. I heard those remarks as well and thought that there was a slight irony in that they were asking us to remain in the EU and so on from the University of Chicago. That shows that we live in the world, not just in Europe, and we must reflect on that.

Dr Philippa Whitford: Those Nobel prize winners represent the last time we had a major brain drain, when, in the ’80s, we lost some of the best minds from the UK. That is one of the dangers: the people who want to be at the cutting edge will not see this as the place to be.

David Mowat: That is a fair point. It could be a danger. The point I was making was that they made the plea to remain in the EU from the United States, which is the leader in many aspects of science. I think we can agree that science is international—it operates in Japan, the US, the UK, Germany, France and elsewhere—and that, however we achieve Brexit, we should do what we can to avoid creating barriers to internationalisation.

Liz McInnes: Will the Minister give way?

David Mowat: Maybe we cannot agree on that. I give way to the hon. Lady.

Liz McInnes: There is no irony in the comments of the Nobel prize winners just because they were made by British scientists working in the United States. That fact only emphasises how international science is. We must not fall into the trap of taking the line that was spread before the referendum:—that this country has had enough of experts. Those people are experts, and we should listen to what they have to say because they are the people who know what is going on. They know what the effect on British science will be if the EMA and its principles are lost.

David Mowat: We can agree that the scientific principles at the core of our world-leading science must not be lost in regulation. We can also agree that science is international. It is in all our interests, and in the interests of our communities and our children, that this country continues to do world-class science as part of an international collaboration. That is the Government’s intent and will.
I will finish by talking about our world-class industry.

Jim Shannon: I have asked a couple of questions about muscular dystrophy on behalf of my constituents. I do not expect the Minister to give me a response today, but I remind him gently to provide a written response and perhaps make it available to other hon. Members who are here.

David Mowat: Clearly when I used the word “finish”, people sprang into action. I will ensure that the hon. Gentleman gets a written answer to his questions on muscular dystrophy.

We do world-class science in this country. We must continue to do so, and to have a world-class pharmaceutical industry, with all that means for value added and input to the Exchequer. Governments are not the reason why we are among the best in the world in gene therapy and cell therapy, and they are not the reason why we have built £60 billion pharmaceutical organisations GlaxoSmithKline and AstraZeneca. It is important that we get the regulatory environment right, and the Department of Health and the Department for Exiting the European Union will ensure that the negotiations we are about to have address those issues.

Dr Wollaston: Does the Minister agree that the reason why we have such world-class expertise is the workforce? We must be absolutely clear and send a message to the world that, within our science and research community, we will not be maintaining a list of who is here from the EU and who is a British scientist. We must unequivocally send a message that Britain is open to scientists, researchers and the medical and healthcare workforce from around the world and the EU, not just from Britain.

David Mowat: That last intervention—I say “last” somewhat hopefully—unites us all. It would be ridiculous if the world-class science that we must continue to do compromised on matters like that. I completely agree with my hon. Friend’s point, and there is agreement across Government about that. If we need to make that clearer, we should.

I will finish now, as nobody is springing to their feet. I thank all hon. Members, particularly the hon. Member for Cambridge, for putting the issue on the agenda. It is right and important that the topic is at the forefront of our negotiations, and that we get the right answer in the end.

Daniel Zeichner: I thank all hon. Members who have taken part today. As so often in these Westminster Hall debates, we have had a much more constructive, collaborative discussion than we might have had in the other Chamber.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said that the die is cast. This morning I was described on my local radio station, BBC Radio Cambridgeshire, as a “remoaner” by one of the more constructive UK Independence party MEPs. I was not sure whether to be insulted or flattered, but my retort was that I think I am a realist. Today’s debate has shown a realistic understanding of the challenges and options that lie ahead. I am encouraged, perhaps more than is helpful for the Minister with regard to his ministerial friends in the Brexit Department, by the suggestion that the European economic area option is the best one for this sector. Many of us will be making that case, and I suspect that the debate will continue. It is right to highlight the importance of the sector, and I am thankful for the opportunity to do so today.

Question put and agreed to.  
Resolved.  
That this House has considered the future of the European Medicines Agency.

Sitting suspended.
Child Tax Credits

[Mr George Howarth in the Chair]

4 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I beg to move:

That this House has considered Government plans to restrict tax credits to two children.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Howarth.

I come to this debate in great frustration. When I first uncovered this issue in the Budget on 8 July last year, I did not expect that I would still be talking about it one year, three months and four days later. Incredibly, unless the Minister can tell me differently this afternoon, the Government are still unable to say exactly how their pernicious and medieval policy will operate.

To set the context, the then Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), outlined in his Budget the Government’s intention to limit the child element of tax credits and universal credits to the first two children in a family. The Budget stated:

“The Department for Work and Pensions and HMRC will develop protections for women who have a third child as the result of rape, or other exceptional circumstances.”

None of the questions asked on the Floor of the House or put directly to Ministers by me or my colleagues over the past year have been answered with a justification or explanation for this fundamentally flawed policy. I want to set out my anger about writing a rape clause into our social security system and about the wider impact of the two-child policy. Neither the rape clause nor the two-child policy is fit for a Government who proclaim their support for families.

Let me deal with the rape clause first. I put on record the public opposition to it from Scottish Women’s Aid, Rape Crisis Scotland, Engender and the more than 10,000 people who signed a petition on the issue. I am deeply upset and disturbed with the attitude that the Government have taken to very vulnerable women and children. No woman should have to prove that she has been raped in order to get tax credits.

I suppose it is not in the spirit of the chummy way in which people in this place like to do things, but I am unapologetic about the way I have spoken out about the meeting I had with the welfare Minister, Lord Freud, back in May. As he is a Member of the House of Lords, I have no opportunity to challenge or question him. I have been to many meetings in my eight years as an opposition local government councillor and in my year in this place, but I have never been so furious. For a Government Minister to open a meeting by saying “I’ve done. Nor will she want to contact the police just for the tax credits. She might not yet have sought the support of her local Women’s Aid or of other sources of assistance. She will almost certainly not want to contact the police just for the tax credits.

There is no clear statement from the Government on how their policy will operate. Once the rape is disclosed, what burden of proof will be acceptable to Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and the Department for Work and Pensions? After all, they are not organisations known for taking people at their word. What will the time limit be? Once a woman has left an abusive relationship and is in a position of safety, will she be able to make a claim retrospectively? Can that claim be backdated? For how long? If a woman needs to claim tax credits at a later stage in her life, because that is the nature of tax credits, will she need to trawl through her sexual history to identify that one of her children was conceived by rape?

How will a claim be recorded? I cannot conceive of a way of doing that that would not be hugely stigmatising both for the woman and for the child. Lord Freud suggested to me that it might take the form of a letter that a woman would have to retain in her records at home. I cannot imagine the distress caused if somebody else in the family came across that letter at a later stage. Alternatively, will the information have to be held on the woman’s records with DWP and HMRC? Will staff have access to it? Which staff? Will they receive appropriate training? The Public and Commercial Services Union has come out against the policy because of the difficult position it would put its members in.

Tax credits may be required at different stages in a woman’s life; would her claim be flagged up on any further occasion when a claim was made, or would she have to declare it on each separate occasion and relive that abuse again and again? Asking a woman to recount a claim retrospectively? Can that claim be backdated? For how long? If a woman needs to claim tax credits at a later stage in her life, because that is the nature of tax credits, will she need to trawl through her sexual history to identify that one of her children was conceived by rape?

I will not be content, though, with solely removing the rape clause, because doing that would offer no protection to families either. The two-child policy must go too. Women’s Aid, the Child Poverty Action Group and the StepChange debt charity all believe that the policy runs counter to the Government’s much-vaunted family test and produces a perverse incentive for families to separate or for single parents to forgo entering new relationships.
The Government have stated that twins and multiple births will also be protected, but I have discovered that that is true only if the twins come after a single birth. According to the Government, people who have twins first have had their lot. That is despicable.

The letter I received from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury on 30 September stated that the Government’s intention was that “all families—those in receipt of benefits and those supporting themselves solely through work—will be faced with the same sorts of financial considerations when making decisions about having more children”.

Aside from sounding as if it has come from some kind of totalitarian regime, that statement is absolute nonsense. Quite evidently, not all families start from the same point, but all families are valuable and worthy of support. The state has a duty to protect the most vulnerable among us.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury is also quite wrong in his assumptions about those claiming tax credits. Some 63% of families who currently receive tax credits for a third or a subsequent child are in work. They are not the very “just managing” families that the Prime Minister referred to on the doorstep of Downing Street. Will she make good on her commitment through deeds and not just warm words? Pursuing the two-child policy would pull the rug from underneath the very families she claims to want to protect.

The two-child policy is completely disproportionate. The Child Poverty Action Group notes that 42% of those who claim child tax credits have only one child, 36% have two children, 16% have three children and only 7% have four or more children. The policy will have a devastating impact on those families and their income but a very limited effect on Treasury coffers.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury’s claim about people “making decisions about having more children” fails to recognise that perhaps when a family had their children, they were well able to afford them. I also doubt that many families make life decisions solely on the basis of their future tax credit income. Is this the thin end of the wedge from the Government? Life is not that simple. It could take only sudden illness, the death of a partner or changes to circumstances that could not reasonably have been foreseen to plunge a family into a situation in which they might need to claim tax credits. The third child that we are speaking of already exists.

Evidence that I have received from StepChange demonstrates that if the two-child policy were applied to their current clients who have three or more children, 90% of those families would have absolutely no money left at the end of the month. The charity fears that, faced with mounting bills, unexpected everyday expenses and other commitments, those families will become extremely vulnerable to going into unmanageable debt. The cost of the bankruptcies that will follow will then end up being passed on to the state. StepChange’s research says that the average client that it deals with would be £327 worse off per month under the Government’s plans.

The policy also has very serious equalities implications, which the Government have not addressed at any stage. Concerns have been expressed to me by the Interlink Foundation, which represents the Orthodox Jewish community and which strongly believes that the policy will perpetuate disincentives to work for families with three or more children, as any additional earnings would reduce their entitlements. It will also make it impossible to achieve the Government’s aim of being better off in work. Interlink points out the substantial differential impact on religious communities, where reproduction, use of contraception and family size can be determined by beliefs and prevailing cultures, which the Government do not appear to have taken into account. According to Interlink’s figures, 52% of Jewish families have three or more children. For the Muslim community, the proportion is 60%. That stands in stark contrast to the population as a whole, out of which only 30% of families have three or more children. I am shocked that the Government have not addressed such a clear equalities issue.

It has been said by no less than the former Prime Minister—perhaps the Minister will repeat these claims today—that I am endlessly whinging, and that the Scottish Government now have the powers to deal with this issue. Those who say that are being extremely misleading, and also unfair to women and children in the rest of the UK, with whom I express my solidarity. The powers being transferred by the UK Government do not allow us in Scotland to set the eligibility criteria for child tax credits. Tax credits are a reserved benefit, and our Government in Scotland should not have to pay for the UK Government’s regressive policies. We have already spent £55 million on mitigating the hated bedroom tax. I would rather see the Scottish Government making positive choices, with all the powers of a normal Parliament, supporting families and lifting people out of poverty.

Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): The hon. Lady is making a powerful speech and I very much agree with the argument she is advancing. I am pleased that she mentioned the Child Poverty Action Group; I pay tribute to the work it is doing on this matter. Does she agree that the Government are determined to pursue such a punitive policy, at the very least they should publish an analysis of its impact on child poverty levels?

Alison Thewliss: I absolutely agree. The United Nations suggests that impact assessments should be carried out on policies that affect children. Such an assessment appears not to exist for this policy.

The Scottish Government can provide top-up benefits where someone is already eligible, but not where they are not. There is also a gap: the two-child policy and the rape clause come into force early next year, but it is unlikely that the full range of social security powers will be operational in Scotland until 2018.

I shall conclude by speaking briefly about our obligations to protect and support children. I contend that the limiting of the child element of tax credits and universal credit to the first two children in a family runs counter to our obligations under the United Nations convention on the rights of the child. We are obliged by article 2 of the UNCRC not to discriminate on the basis of birth,
but the two-child policy clearly does so, by apportioning value according to when the child was born into a family. We are obliged under article 3 to make the best interests of the child a primary consideration, but the two-child policy and the rape clause stigmatise, and say that the Government do not value all children equally. They also limit working parents’ ability to feed and care for the children they already have. We are obliged under articles 26 and 27 to provide access to social security and an adequate standard of living, to assist parents in the bringing up of their children. The two-child limit completely undermines that right.

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and the UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights have both recently investigated the UK for its approach to welfare reform and highlighted in very strong terms their concerns about the Government’s austerity agenda and the cuts to tax credits that have already happened. In its July report, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child stated that it was “seriously concerned that…Recent amendments to the Tax Credits Act (2002), the Welfare Reform Act (2012) and the Welfare Reform and Work Act (2016) have limited the entitlement to child tax credits and social…regardless of the needs of the households”.

That is absolutely appalling. In their report to the UNCRC, the UK’s Children’s Commissioners said that “measures should not discriminate against children from particular groups for example children of lone parents, children with disabilities or children from large families.”

The rape clause and the two-child policy do discriminate in those ways.

The two-child policy and the rape clause fundamentally punish families for the circumstances they are in—circumstances that may be beyond their control and in which children already exist. I urge the Minister and the Government to act in the best interests of children, as are in a family but not tax credits?

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The two-child policy and the rape clause fundamentally punish families for the circumstances they are in—circumstances that may be beyond their control and in which children already exist. I urge the Minister and the Government to act in the best interests of children, as are in a family but not tax credits?
The reforms to tax credits cannot be considered in isolation. The Government are committed to making life easier for working families. We want to support parents claiming benefits to get into and stay in work after having a child. From September next year, the Government are extending free childcare entitlement from 15 hours to 30 hours a week for working parents of three and four-year-olds. Alongside the introduction of tax-free childcare, that support gives parents more freedom when making decisions about whether and, indeed, when to return to work.

Alison Thewliss: Does the Minister accept that there is a further inconsistency? Tax-free childcare is not limited to the first two children within a family; it is for all children within a family, unlike this limitation that she is seeking to impose.

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Lady may not like the response that I keep giving but I will continue to give it. The reality is that the Government want working families and those in receipt of working tax credits to be on the same footing and to make the same difficult decisions. I have no doubt that there will be people in this Chamber who have made difficult decisions about how many children that they wish to have and can afford to have. This issue is about fairness for all families.

Of course, as the hon. Lady will be aware, roll-out of universal credit, the Government’s flagship welfare reform, is continuing. Universal credit is already transforming lives across the country, with those in universal credit moving into work significantly faster and staying in work longer than under the old system. We are now expanding universal credit to all claimants across the country, so that everyone has the chance to benefit from the dignity of a job, the pride of a pay packet and the security that comes from being able to support their family.

The evidence shows us that universal credit is working. As I say, people move into work faster than before. For every 100 people who find work under the old jobseeker’s allowance system, 113 universal credit claimants have found a job. People on universal credit spend more time than before looking for a job—in fact, around 50% more time—and they are actively looking to increase their hours and their earnings.

More than a quarter of a million people are now receiving universal credit, with some 12,500 new claims every week. We have already launched universal credit full service in Musselburgh and Inverness, and next month we are rolling it out to Kirkintilloch, Port Glasgow and Greenock. I have had the pleasure of visiting both live service and full service jobcentres in Barnsley and Newcastle. I was impressed by what I saw, including the commitment of the work coaches, and indeed their sensitivity and ability to respond to the different circumstances and the different needs of individual claimants.

Alison Thewliss indicated dissent.

Caroline Nokes: The hon. Lady shakes her head, but I extend to her an invitation, which I am sure she has already received from others, to visit a local jobcentre, to see for herself how our reforms are working in action.

We also recognise that some claimants are not able to make the same choices about the number of children in their family as others. The Government have been clear that there will be exemptions for certain groups, and it is worth outlining these groups in some detail. Exemptions apply to third or subsequent children who are part of a multiple birth, where there were previously fewer than two children in the household; to children living long-term with friends or family and who are at risk of entering the care system; or to those children born as a result of rape.

Peter Grant (Glenrothes) (SNP): Will the Minister give way on that point?

Caroline Nokes: I would give way to the hon. Gentleman but there are many really important points that I would like to get through in the time allocated to me, and I have already taken a number of interventions from the hon. Member for Glasgow Central and one intervention from the hon. Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis).

Today, I am pleased to be able to inform hon. Members that, as part of the Children and Social Work Bill, the Government have given further consideration to the position of children who are being adopted from local authority care, and we will extend the announced exemption to all third or subsequent children in these circumstances. This change will support families who care for our most vulnerable children, and they will be provided for, along with the other exemptions, in regulations.

Of course, we are aware that these exemptions are sensitive and complicated, and we want to make sure that we get this process right. That is why we are consulting with a number of stakeholders from charities, women’s representative organisations and indeed religious groups.

The Government recognise that women who have a child born as a result of rape face extremely difficult circumstances. That is why we are considering very carefully the best possible way to deliver this exemption. I want to be very clear that we are not looking to rely on or to pre-empt decisions within the criminal justice system. Instead, we are looking to ensure that claimants receive the help they need at the time they need it, using criteria that are straightforward to apply and not overly intrusive, while providing the right assurance to Government that the additional support is going to those for whom it is intended.

Our current thinking is that a third-party evidence model offers the most promising approach to strike the balance we need to achieve. This is a model where a woman can request the exemption by engaging with a professional third party, such as a healthcare professional or a social worker. This approach would not be new for the benefit system. For example, within universal credit we use a similar model for the relaxation of the requirements to be available for work in cases of domestic violence, where the evidence required is the reporting of abuse to a third party acting in an official capacity, and that model was developed with input from stakeholders. We recognise the sensitivity of this exemption and the need to get advice from experts, so we have sought views from stakeholder groups involved in supporting victims of rape to help us to develop this exemption.

The hon. Member for Glasgow Central raised a large number of issues, and I will set out the Government’s vision for a sustainable welfare system that supports working families and encourages them to make similar...
decisions to those made by people who support themselves fully through work. I will also respond to the intervention from the hon. Member for Barnsley Central regarding the impacts of the policy of limiting support to two children in tax credit and universal credit, while meeting our obligations as set out in the public sector equality duty. The Government have set out our assessments of the impacts of the policy as part of the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, on 20 July 2015, in a published impact assessment.

The Government are cutting income tax for more than 30 million people this year and we took 4 million of the lowest paid out of income tax completely during the last Parliament. By 2018, a typical basic-rate taxpayer will pay more than £1,000 less in income tax than they did in 2010. Universal credit now provides for 85% of childcare costs for families with two children; this could be worth £13,000 a year.

The number of people in work is at a record high. With the national living wage, we have given a pay rise to 1 million of the lowest paid, and we have overhauled the welfare system so that it pays to work rather than to claim benefits. The number of workless households has fallen by nearly 200,000 in the past year and now stands at 3.1 million, which is the lowest figure since records began. The number of children living in workless households has fallen by 557,000 since 2010, and there are now 100,000 fewer children in relative low income compared to the number in 2010. In the hon. Lady’s own constituency of Glasgow Central, the employment rate has increased by 2.9 percentage points since 2010, to 62.9% in March 2016. This reflects the fact that there are now 2,000 more people in work in her constituency than there were in 2010. The Government are committed to ensuring that those in work are paid a fair wage and have opportunities to progress and to achieve their potential.

The Smith Commission agreement was very clear that universal credit should remain a reserved UK Government benefit, so that there is a clear and consistent offer of vital support to people in England, Scotland and Wales. Where the UK Government decide to make changes to reserved benefits, such as eligibility criteria, or to how payments for dependent children are calculated, those changes will apply equally across England, Scotland and Wales.

However, the Scotland Act 2016 gives the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Ministers significant new welfare powers. Not only can they now work with us to change certain defined elements of universal credit, such as the way that the housing cost calculation is made, but they will also get responsibility for a range of existing UK Government benefits, which were worth £2.7 billion in Scotland in 2014-15.

Crucially, the Scottish Government also now have new, wide-ranging powers to pay cash top-ups to anyone receiving a reserved benefit, or to introduce brand new benefits in devolved areas. This means that the Scottish Government can tailor the welfare system in Scotland, to meet both their own political aims and local needs.

In conclusion, I would like to reassure hon. Members that the Government are committed to achieving these welfare reforms. Putting welfare spending on a sustainable footing, and in a way that protects the most vulnerable, is vital as we progress to a society that will give working families more control over their lives. It will also ensures fairness for all families—both those who are paying for, and those who are receiving support from, the welfare system.

The hon. Member for Glasgow Central is right to raise the issue about the rape exemption; she has made her point and she has made it repeatedly to different Ministers. However, the Department for Work and Pensions is determined to address this issue with fairness and sensitivity, to make sure that women have the opportunity to report in a safe environment to trusted professionals. It is critically important that we extend that opportunity to them and that we do not remove the exemption, because I think that would be a very dangerous and unfair thing to do.

However, it is important that we instil within the benefits system a fairness for all families, for those who make choices about how many children they can afford to have, and that will apply to those who are working and supporting themselves solely through work, as well as to those who are in receipt of tax credit. Our priority remains to help working parents by providing them with the support they need to get on in life, and in doing so we will make life easier for all families.

Question put and agreed to.
Leaving the EU: UK Tourism

4.30 pm

Nigel Huddleston (Mid Worcestershire) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on tourism.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth, and I am grateful for the opportunity to introduce this debate today. I thank all those individuals and bodies who have sent information relating to the debate to me and others.

Tourism is the UK’s fourth largest industry and our fifth biggest export earner. It contributes £127 billion to the UK economy and sustains more than 3 million jobs—about 10% of the workforce. It is growing fast. The industry incorporates more than 200,000 small and medium-sized enterprises and more than a quarter of all new jobs created since 2010 have been in the hospitality and tourism space. Yet the contribution of the tourism industry is not always reflected in the attention it receives in this place.

It is important to differentiate three key sectors when discussing the industry: domestic, which is Brits holidaying in Britain; inbound, which is overseas visitors coming to Britain; and outbound, which is Brits travelling overseas. There is also aviation, which traverses all three sectors. The three sectors are impacted by Brexit in different ways by labour market implications, regulations and, in particular, the recent weakness of the pound. It may be argued that, overall, the implications of Brexit for the domestic and inbound tourism market are generally good, while they are generally bad for the outbound and aviation sectors—but it is not quite as simple as that.

I turn first to the good news, on the inbound sector. Last year, a record 36.1 million overseas visitors came to the UK. They spent a record £22.1 billion. The 2016 figures show a continuation of that trend, with 21.1 million overseas visitors between January and July, which is 2% up on last year. Visitors from Europe play a key role in our inbound travel industry. More than 60% of overseas holiday visitors and more than 70% of business visitors to the UK were from the EU, including 0.9 million from Italy, 1.4 million from Germany and 1.9 million from France. Clearly, any additional burdens or restrictions on travel to the UK from Europe will have an immediate and negative impact on visitor numbers. Visa-free access from Europe for short leisure and business trips is certainly the desired long-term aim from a tourism perspective. One of the plus points of Brexit and the weak pound is that it makes visits to the UK comparatively more affordable, yet even with the weaker pound the UK remains a very expensive place to visit by global standards and we continue to lose market share of the global tourism market.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. In the tourism industry in Brighton, people are deeply concerned about leaving the EU. In terms of their businesses, does he agree that it makes even more sense now for the Government to commit to cutting VAT on tourism services in order to create more of a level playing field? So many of our European competitors have much lower VAT on their tourism businesses. Now is the time for the UK to commit to the same.

Nigel Huddleston: I could not agree more. The return on investment for the campaign was £23 for every £1 spent, which is compelling. There is a good argument for increasing spending on VisitBritain, the GREAT campaign and also on VisitEngland. The Government’s introduction last year of the Discover England fund—a £40 million, three-year programme that successfully attracted a large number of high-quality bids—was also welcome, and we should consider expanding that.

The UK tourism sector is highly dependent on overseas workers, not least in London, where 70% of those working in the hospitality sector are EU migrants. Those employees actively contribute to the UK economy and provide a high-quality experience to our visitors. The Government need to provide reassurances to those people that they are welcome and valued, and that it is the Government’s intention that their right to stay will be unaffected by the referendum decision.

On the domestic tourism market, in 2015, domestic visitors spent more in Britain than ever before. Some £19.6 billion was spent by British residents on overnight trips in England alone, and more was spent in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—I must make sure I get them all in. The number of domestic trips exceeded 100 million, which is 11% higher than in 2014. I am proud to say that my own region, the west midlands, saw the biggest growth, with overnight trips up 22% and spending up 26%. A weak pound will make a UK staycation an even more attractive proposition, but that may be temporary. As the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) suggested, cutting VAT on tourism and other options should be carefully considered to sustain that growth in the long term.

I am sure many colleagues will extol the virtues of their own patches in their speeches. I will turn my attention to the outbound and aviation sectors, where the outlook is perhaps a little more challenging.

Outbound tourism is an often overlooked part of our tourism economy, but it employs more than 215,000 people in businesses, including tour operators such as Thomas Cook and TUI, travel agents and airlines such as Easyjet and Monarch. UK residents made an astonishing
65.7 million visits abroad in 2015, 9.5% more than in 2014. Again, our links with the European Union are very strong. Some 76% of holidays abroad and 68% of business trips were to the EU. In 2015, 3.5 million Brits visited Italy, 8.8 million visited France and an incredible 13 million visited Spain. The weakness of the pound means that holidays overseas are inevitably going to cost more next year than this year and last year, and Brexit brings some additional uncertainties for the outbound sector. Some of the concerns for consumers include what will happen to roaming fees and the European health insurance card, passenger rights, as well as the issue of the EU package travel directive, which offers consumers protection in case of insolvency or where there is a failure to provide contracted services. I would welcome the Minister’s comments on how the Government intend to deal with those matters as we exit the EU. The unfortunate collapse of Low Cost Holidays this summer has made clearer than ever the importance of protections such as the Civil Aviation Authority’s air travel organisers’ licence protection scheme.

The UK has the largest aviation market in Europe and the third largest network of routes in the world, behind only the United States and China. It is vital that the UK aviation sector retains its place as a global leader and that we maintain the lower prices, better service and greater choice that aviation liberalisation has provided to British consumers. We need to aim for new aviation agreements as quickly as possible and to maintain the current market access that gives our airlines the right to operate air services both within and beyond Europe. We should be aiming to convince the 27 remaining members of the EU that it is in their interests, as much as ours, to maintain the aviation links that play such a key role in the prosperity of all our nations.

There is no getting away from the fact that the access the UK currently enjoys comes from our membership of the EU. That includes access not only to the EU market, but to that outside Europe, as the UK benefits from being part of the EU’s aviation agreements with other countries, including, crucially, the EU-US open skies agreement. Unless the Government reach new agreements on maintaining market access, our airlines will have no legal right to operate services, and there are no World Trade Organisation minimal alternatives to fall back on in this sector. The UK might also be able to review air passenger duty on flights. Our APD is already one of the highest in the world, and it significantly adds to the cost of flights.

Clearly, there are both challenges and opportunities for the tourism industry as the UK exits the European Union. Given the overall economic contribution of the tourism sector, it is vital that the Government pull what levers they can to protect jobs and to take advantage of the window of opportunity that the weak pound brings to attract even more visitors to the UK.

The Minister will be familiar with many of my policy asks. I believe that we must make a decision about airport expansion in the south-east quickly and start negotiations on aviation deals, access and landing slots as a matter of urgency. We should carefully review air passenger duty and the cost and processing of multiple-entry visas. We should review all EU regulations, such as the package travel directive. We should revisit and reconsider reducing VAT on tourism, and we should consider increasing the budgets of VisitEngland, VisitBritain and the Discover England fund. We must continue to find ways to attract visitors outside London, where 50% of all inbound tourism money is spent, and get more tourists into our beautiful countryside and the regions.

Those are lots of asks. To be fair, the Government are taking tourism seriously. I was very pleased indeed that one of the first publications of the new Government under the new Prime Minister was the “Tourism Action Plan”, which updated the five-point plan that David Cameron announced within weeks of the 2015 election. I also welcome the fact that cross-departmental efforts are being made to grow tourism. I hope that, through this debate and further such discussions in this place and with industry, we will be able to formulate a positive future for tourism outside the EU, but remain very much open to Europe and, indeed, the world.

**Several hon. Members rose—**

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. The brevity of the hon. Gentleman’s speech is very helpful because it means that at least one or two more colleagues will be able to get in, so I congratulate him on that. To get in everybody who has expressed an interest in speaking, I am reluctantly going to have to impose a time limit of three minutes per speech. If Members take interventions—they are perfectly at liberty to do so—I may, during the course of the debate, have to consider reducing that time limit still further.

4.42 pm

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) on securing the debate. He and I co-chair the all-party parliamentary group for the visitor economy, and I know that he has a background in tourism and an abiding interest in it. He raised various issues. The all-party group has already undertaken an inquiry into apprenticeships—in particular, the apprenticeship levy—and we have noted the deficit in training for chefs in the hospitality industry, which needs to be pursued in this post-Brexit negotiation phase. We will also look at the issue of coastal economies.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the issue of air passenger duty. As a representative of a constituency in Northern Ireland, I would very much like us to compete with the Republic of Ireland, where air passenger duty is at 0%. I want an equivalent level in Northern Ireland to attract more visitors to sample our historical sites. Heritage tourism is of particular importance to us. We also want a reduction of VAT on tourism because, again, we are competing with the Republic of Ireland. VAT on tourism in the Republic of Ireland is levied at 9%, whereas ours is 20%.

In the post-Brexit situation, there is the possibility—although I hope not—of an EU border on the island. I do not want to see that happening, because that could have further detrimental consequences for our tourism industry. In my constituency, tourism is a catalyst for economic development, sustaining jobs and creating new ones, because manufacturing does not exist to the same extent as it does elsewhere.

I fear that the priority for the Northern Ireland tourism sector after the referendum will be damage limitation, rather than seizing new opportunities. Contrary to the negative characterisation of our tourism industry by
some Brexiteers—I am simply stating a fact—the tourism sector in Northern Ireland was already creating new opportunities and opening itself up to a wider audience before the referendum took place. We benefited considerably from the European funding mechanisms that were in place on a cross-border basis. Some areas were marketed through those mechanisms. In fact, the island of Ireland, north and south, is marketed through Tourism Ireland. Therefore, we want all forms of mitigation to be pursued, we want to retain the Interreg funding mechanisms that were dedicated to tourism development and tourism projects, and we want to develop our existing tourism products, including our Christian heritage, our general heritage tourism and our special landscape quality. In the negotiations, we want the Government to take into account our unique situation, in terms of tourism development, and we do not want to see a hard border.

4.45 pm

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) on securing this important debate. In the main Chamber of the House of Commons this afternoon the referendum campaign is being rerun, so it is nice that in Westminster Hall we are looking at what the threats and opportunities of Brexit are for this important industry. It is also great to see the south-west so well represented. It just goes to show how important tourism is to our region, and that we are indeed the best region to visit in the United Kingdom, if not the world. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, of course, Mr Howarth.

I rise to speak in two capacities: first, as an MP for a constituency that has some fantastic tourism opportunities and for which the visitor economy is hugely important; and, secondly, as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the UK events industry. Both roles have effectively the same demands. The challenge of Brexit for the hospitality industry and the events industry is that they have increasingly relied on a migrant workforce. The potential that the workforce will be less available is challenging to many businesses in our sector.

Another challenge, particularly for the events industry, pertains to business travel, and meetings and conferences that are hosted in the United Kingdom. If we make it less easy for our European neighbours to visit us, we must balance that by putting in place a more permissive visa regime for business travellers from the emerging markets, which we are hoping to open up with our free trade agreements with the rest of the world. It is hugely important that we get that right so this incredible place for hosting business travel and tourism alike is somewhere that people can come to easily. When they arrive, there must be a quick and easy immigration process so that their first experience of the United Kingdom is not one of hassle.

In addition, the tourism and events industries in the UK must be able to access European-wide supply chains. Those industries are interconnected across the European Union, and there is a real danger that, if we were to leave the free market, those supply chains would no longer be available to us. It is important that, as an industry, we say that that needs to be addressed. Where supply chains exist in the EU and UK companies organise events or send tours into the European Union, they should be given all the advantages of the free market, even if the Government’s choice is that we do not remain in it.

I have set out several key threats, but there are, of course, opportunities. More than anything else, we must ensure that the UK continues to be a world-class destination for leisure or business, so that, whatever the impact of Brexit may be, we counter that by being a brilliant place to come. In closing, there are a couple of things that I think the Government should seek to do—

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. I call Corri Wilson.

4.49 pm

Corri Wilson (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (SNP): Almost 1.5 million visitors arrived in Scotland from the European Union last year, and spending by tourists in Scotland contributes about £6 billion to Scottish GDP. We have in the region of 15,000 tourism-related enterprises, accounting for almost 8% of employment in Scotland. What we do not have is certainty. Despite years of bickering between the factions in the Conservative party, despite promises on the sides of buses from leave campaigners, and despite almost four months of pondering by the Government since the referendum in June, we still have no idea what Brexit means.

The Prime Minister is keen to emphasise that “Brexit means Brexit,” as if that statement carried any meaning. It does not. It seems that every day there is another Tory statement that contradicts the last. Will it be soft Brexit or hard Brexit? Will we retain membership of the single market or just access to it, and on what terms? Will there be hard borders? Will European tourists need visas? Will European nationals living, working and paying taxes here in the UK be told to leave? We still do not know what form of Brexit the United Kingdom Government seek to pursue, what they hope to achieve in their Brexit negotiations or what the rest of Europe will be inclined to offer us.

The tourism industry in Scotland and across the UK is facing unprecedented uncertainty, not just because of the Brexit vote but because those who campaigned for it and those who have since jumped on the bandwagon have no coherent plan. I suspect that they never had one.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Tourism industries, wherever they are, do not exist in a vacuum but depend on other industries. For example, the food and drink industry is supremely important to tourism in my constituency, and that industry has long had protection from the EU under product designation orders. Does the hon. Lady agree that that is the sort of detail that we need to hear about from the Government?

Corri Wilson: Yes, absolutely. That proves what a complex situation we are in, and we need some answers.

Office for National Statistics figures suggest that Brexit could create a huge financial barrier to businesses and tourism if visa charges are levied on travel to Scotland. If EU visitors to the UK have to start shelling out £87 a pop for a standard short-stay visitor visa, how many will decide to stay on the other side of the channel? Although Scotland has much to offer, long, hot, sunny days are not our biggest draw, so we need to
make it easy for holidaymakers to choose us, not put obstacles in their way. If the Tories decide that we do not get to keep the benefits of free travel for our European neighbours, the resulting financial barrier could have dire economic consequences for the Scottish tourism industry.

Scraping the free movement of people will have an adverse impact on the workforce of our tourism industry—an industry that employs in excess of 25,000 EU nationals in Scotland. Such migrants make a valuable contribution to Scotland and are an important part of our future; they both contribute to sustainable economic growth and mitigate the effects of demographic change. Scotland’s rural economy in particular benefits from migrant workers from other EU countries. The new Prime Minister’s first commitment should have been that EU citizens would have the right to remain in the UK, but it seems that she is content to use them as a bargaining chip. It is crucial for businesses and communities across rural Scotland and the tourism sector that the UK Government provide guarantees on the residency status of EU nationals living in Scotland.

In these uncertain times, we in Scotland are working hard to support and promote economic stability and reassure EU nationals who have chosen to make Scotland their home that they remain welcome. The Scottish Government have been engaging with the tourism sector about what Brexit may mean for both EU visitors and the many EU citizens who are employed in the sector. We are committed to supporting the tourism industry by delivering a 50% reduction in air passenger duty. Tourism is worth billions of pounds to Scotland’s economy and is hugely important to local communities such as mine in Ayrshire, the home of Burns, which depends on the jobs and investment that tourism brings. It is shameful that the UK Government’s lack of clarity and direction is creating such uncertainty and instability and placing barriers in the path of that vital industry. They need to act now to reassure the tourism sector.

4.53 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) on securing this important debate.

I believe it was no coincidence that in July 2015, the former Prime Minister, David Cameron, chose to come to the Lost Gardens of Heligan in my constituency in mid-Cornwall to launch the Government’s tourism strategy. Tourism is clearly vital to Cornwall and its economy; it represents around 15% of our local economy—31,000 jobs and 3,000 businesses—and many more businesses in the supply chain support the industry. It would be difficult to overemphasise the importance of tourism to the Cornish economy. It is therefore vital that we consider the effect of Brexit on tourism and Cornwall’s future.

The initials signs have been positive. Virtually every tourism-related business that I have spoken to this year—whether in Newquay or places such as Mevagissey or Fowey—has reported that it is having a positive year, and some have actually said that they are having a record year. That is probably to some extent down to the “Poldark” effect, and we are grateful to the BBC for its weekly primetime advert for Cornwall on Sunday evening television, but I suspect that a lot of it is more to do with the value of the pound, which has encouraged UK tourists to take staycations. Cornwall is clearly one of the destinations of choice for holidays in the UK, but it also attracts visitors from overseas.

As we consider our position on leaving the EU, it is vital that tourism is put at the heart of our renegotiation, and we need to do more to consider inbound tourism to the UK as part of our international trade. It is an export, and we need to support it. Now is the time to invest more in promoting the UK as a tourist destination for overseas visitors.

I add my voice to some of the points that my hon. Friend made about the importance of aviation in our negotiations on leaving the EU. The current situation makes it even more vital than ever to make a decision on airport expansion in the south-east and to get international and domestic connections. We must ensure that we negotiate aviation agreements before we leave, because it is vital that we have continuity; we cannot afford not to have aviation agreements in place for just one day.

There are clearly both challenges and opportunities for the tourism industry as we leave the EU. In conclusion, I would like to invite all hon. Members to stay in the UK and come on holiday to Cornwall next year.

4.56 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) on securing this important debate.

I am surprised that no thinking or planning appears to have been done in Whitehall about the effects of leaving the European Union on tourism. Mind you, there does not seem to have been any Whitehall planning for the effects of Brexit on anything. Apart from the possibility of visas being introduced to stop those pesky Europeans sneaking in here without telling us, having holidays and spending money, we are only now starting to see the outcomes of the leave vote.

I assume that we all got a briefing from the Performers’ Alliance—I declare an interest as a member of the Performers’ Alliance all-party parliamentary group—that laid out its fears about performers not being able to move freely and tour after Brexit. The same thing will happen in reverse; a closed border will mean that cultural tourism will be damaged and fewer performers, artists and musicians will come here. The restrictions being imposed by UK Visas and Immigration on performers from around the world are already having an adverse impact on my constituency. Edinburgh, of course, plays host to the largest arts festival in the world every year, and performers are now regularly being refused visas for the festival. If that gets worse because EU visitors and performers are forced down the same route, our international reputation for high-quality artistic endeavour will be affected.

In 2010, the European Tour Operators Association did some research about the effects of the UK not being in the Schengen visa scheme and concluded that UK tour operators were losing substantial business and turnover. Tourists from furth of Europe were losing substantial business and tour operators were losing substantial business and turnover. Tourists from furth of Europe were losing substantial business and tour operators were losing substantial business and turnover. Tourists from furth of Europe were losing substantial business and tour operators were losing substantial business and turnover. Tourists from furth of Europe were losing substantial business and tour operators were losing substantial business and turnover. Tourists from furth of Europe were losing substantial business and tour operators were losing substantial business and turnover. Tourists from furth of Europe were losing substantial business and tour operators were losing substantial business and turnover. Tourists from furth of Europe were losing substantial business and tour operators were losing substantial business and turnover. Tourists from furth of Europe were losing substantial business and tour operators were losing substantial business and turnover. Tourists from furth of Europe were losing substantial business and tour operators were losing substantial business and turnover. Tourists from furth of Europe were losing substantial business and tour operators were losing substantial business and turnover. Tourists from furth of Europe were losing substantial business and tour operators were losing substantial business and turnover. Tourists from furth of Europe were losing substantial business and tour operators were losing substantial business and turnover. Tourists from furth of Europe were losing substantial business and tour operators were losing substantial business and turnover. Tourists from furth of Europe were losing substantial business and tour operators were losing substantial business and turnover. Tourists from furth of Europe were losing substantial business and tour operators were losing substantial business and turnover. Tourists from furth of Europe were losing substantial business and tour operators were losing substantial business and turnover. Tourists from furth of Europe were losing substantial business and tour operators were losing substantial business and turnover. Tourists from furth of Europe were losing substantial business and tour operators were losing substantial business and turnover. Tourists from furth of Europe were losing substantial business and tour operators were losing substantial business and turnover. Tourists from furth of Europe were losing substantial business and tour operators were losing substantial business and turnover. Tourists from furth of Europe were losing substantial business and tour operators were losing substantial business and turnover. Tourists from furth of Europe were losing substantial business and tour operators were losing substantial business and turnover. Tourists from furth of Europe were losing substantial business and tour operators were losing substantial business and turnover. Tourists from furth of Europe were losing substantial business and tour operators were losing substantial business and turno
If they are looking for investment opportunities and can travel to the biggest chunk of Europe on one visa, some must wonder why they should pay extra for the UK. The lesson of Schengen is, of course, that free movement of people is advantageous to the economy, and especially to industries such as tourism and culture, which require people physically to move from one place to another. If we cut ourselves off from the 500 million people in the EU, how much damage will have been caused to those industries by Brexiters?

As the walls go up to build fortress Brexit and we are told to duck and cover while the assembled intellectual might of the leave campaign protects us from foreigners, let us take a moment to think this through. Is it really to our advantage to cut ourselves off from tourists, customers, trade and exchange? Hotels need their doors open to welcome customers, and we need our borders open to welcome tourists. Brexit is doing us a lot of damage already, and the Government have to start looking at ways to mitigate that.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): There are two Back-Bench speakers left, and I will then call the Scottish National party Front-Bench spokesman at 5.05 pm, so will the next two speakers try to share what time is left between them?

5 pm

Mrs Sheryll Murray (South East Cornwall) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) on securing time for Members to discuss this important matter. As he and the Minister will be aware, I campaigned wholeheartedly for the UK to leave the European Union. Tourism is close to my heart as my constituency is, in my opinion, the most beautiful in the UK, attracting thousands of visitors each year. I know, however, that my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris) would intervene if she could to contest that and say the same about her constituency.

Brexit offers the opportunity to further invigorate our thriving tourism industry by reducing red tape, enabling more diversification and demonstrating that the UK remains open for business and welcomes visitors from around the world. The tourism industry contributed £56 billion in economic output in 2013, and tourism-related industries employ 2.8 million people, which is 9% of all employment. There were 36.1 million inbound visits to the UK in 2015, with London being the most popular destination, attracting 51% of all visits. However, Cornwall remains one of Britain’s most popular tourist destinations outside the capital.

Visit Cornwall’s vital work is underpinned by the Government’s five point plan, as my hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) mentioned. I recently spoke to Chinese business leaders and was pleased to learn that enhanced visa services are making a positive impact, particularly as Chinese visitors spend an average of £2,500 each when visiting the UK.

It would be wrong not to acknowledge that some tourism organisations and businesses have concerns about the long-term impacts of Brexit. I understand those concerns, particularly around immigration, taxation and regulation. I will pay close attention to those issues on behalf of my constituents and raise them with Ministers if necessary.

I was encouraged, however, when the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union said that he would protect the rights of EU citizens here provided that Britons in Europe are treated in the same way.

If we all work together, Brexit will enable our wonderful tourism industry to thrive further still. I was encouraged to read in a House of Commons Library briefing paper: “The attractions management firm, Continuum...although it disagreed with the decision” to leave the European Union—“believed the UK was ‘resilient enough to survive and thrive’” outside the European Union. I share that confidence.

5.3 pm

Rebecca Pow (Taunton Deane) (Con): I rise to support my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston), particularly on his good points about visa-free travel, airport expansion and VAT on tourism. If we can address those issues and take advantage of the weak pound, there are huge opportunities to build on tourism in this country, and it is crucial that we do so. Public relations and promotion will form a big part of what we need to do to up our game.

Tourism is really important in the south-west, bringing in £10.7 billion. In Somerset alone, where my constituency is, it brings in £1.2 billion. It also employs 10% of the workforce. When the whole of Somerset was recently shut because of flooding, the consequences were dire for rural tourism: we lost something like £250 million as a result. We do not ever want to see that happen again, so we do not want an impact of leaving the EU to be that we see no tourists coming. We do not want a knock-on effect as significant as that. We must therefore make tourism, which is already important, even more significant.

I will look at one area that is a great selling point for the UK, and the south-west in particular—garden tourism, which brings £1.4 billion a year into the UK. Many of whom are from Germany, France, the Netherlands and Belgium. I have worked at that garden, promoting many of them.

Hestercombe attracts 100,000 visitors a year, which brings £1.4 billion a year into the UK. Just in my constituency we have Cothay Manor and Hestercombe gardens. Hestercombe attracts 100,000 visitors a year, most of whom are from Germany, France, the Netherlands and Belgium. I have worked at that garden, promoting it for tourism, and there are great opportunities to build on that strength, but we must ensure that those visitors can still get here easily.

I stress in particular the importance of the Government building on all their commitments on connectivity. Our visitors have to be able to get from A to B, and I stress to the Minister that we want the injection of funds to continue.

5.5 pm

John Nicolson (East Dunbartonshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) on securing the debate. Whether it is walkers setting off from my beautiful constituency towards the foot of Ben Nevis on the West Highland Way, or those who learn of their ancestors, discover our historic castles, enjoy our renowned food and drink or sample Scotland’s art and museums, Scotland caters for all, the length and breadth of the country.
Tourism is arguably Scotland’s most important industry, as we showcase ourselves to the world. There is significant danger that leaving the European Union will result in unnecessary barriers, which will deter visitors and investment in our country and harm this important industry.

Quite needlessly, the Scottish tourism industry now faces the real possibility of Brexit inflicting long-term damage on a sector that is so vital for Scotland’s economy and sense of self. More than three months on from the referendum, no decision has been made on the single market or the status of EU nationals living in and traveling to the country, while the value of the pound continues to plummet.

European funds are vital to the tourism sector in Scotland. VisitScotland currently draws down £11.7 million in European regional development funds. European funding support for tourism development activities is especially important in rural areas, creating jobs and boosting wealth in peripheral, relatively poor regions. Of course, projects that improve the infrastructure and tourism appeal of locations such as the highlands and islands of Scotland have received assistance from Brussels, not least the new tourist route in northern Scotland, the north coast 500, which is dubbed Scotland’s route 66. Such projects show ways of showcasing Scotland, using the natural and human resources we have to their full potential.

Unlike the United Kingdom Government, the Scottish Government have made it clear that we want EU nationals to live in the country and stay in the country. The tourism and hospitality industry in Scotland employs in excess of 25,000 European Union workers, and having access to a skilled and motivated labour market remains a priority for the industry. We do not want the free movement of people to end.

All the young dynamic people from throughout the European Union who work here could lose their jobs, and the hotel owners and managers would find them difficult to replace. Furthermore, figures from the Office for National Statistics show that Brexit could create a £270 million barrier to business and tourism from charges levied on travel to and from Scotland.

A third of Italians and Spaniards, 30% of Germans and a quarter of French holidaymakers said that a leave vote would make them less inclined to travel to the United Kingdom. Part of the reason why people come to Scotland is the warmth of the welcome, and it is vital that that continues.

Perhaps most worrying of all is the feeling that the United Kingdom leaving the European Union has generated. Increasingly, it feels to many of us that the UK is becoming more insular and less open to outsiders. When the Prime Minister said last week: “If you believe you’re a citizen of the world, you’re a citizen of nowhere”, that sent out a strong message to people living here and to potential visitors throughout the world. We on the Scottish National party Benches feel very different, and our message could not be more different: “If you are citizens anywhere in the world, you are welcome in Scotland.”

5.9 pm

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) on securing this important debate, and I thank every hon. Member who has contributed. Some excellent points have been made by the hon. Members for South Down (Ms Ritchie) for Argyll and Bute (Heappey), for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Corri Wilson), for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double), for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock), for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) and for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), and by the SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson).

It says something about the significant ramifications of Brexit that we are debating its impact on tourism. One would not normally think a constitutional referendum would lead us to debating the future of the UK tourism industry, so it is quite a surprise that it has come to this, but it shows how important the Brexit vote is to the future of the industry.

As has been pointed out, there has actually been a short-term boost to the tourism industry since the Brexit referendum. Despite the weather over the past few months, tourism in the UK has gone up; visitor numbers from outside the UK have risen since June 23. This July saw a 1% increase compared with the same period last year, while the number of staycations—visitors from inside the UK—has also risen since June. That is important. As hon. Members have said, tourism is an important industry that accounts for 9% of the UK’s employment.

The principal reason for that increase in tourist numbers in recent months is the weakness of the pound, which has been caused by both the impact of the Brexit vote itself and, I am afraid, by the Government’s mishandling of the aftermath of the vote. With each faltering step in their handling of Brexit, the pound has devalued further. Yesterday, its value against the US dollar dropped to below $1.23. On UK visitors who are going to Europe on holiday, one of our colleagues was in Venice recently taking a hard-earned short break away from his constituency, and he told me he was getting parity when exchanging the pound for the euro while he was there.

Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Kevin Brennan: I will in a moment. What is not clear—perhaps the hon. Gentleman can clear this up for me—is whether the Government want a weaker pound.

Kevin Foster: If we want to talk about how things went over the summer, I must say it was a real spectacle to observe the hon. Gentleman’s own party.

I was actually going to be slightly more positive and constructive and say that one reason why people see places such as Torbay as great places to come to is that we are a safe and welcoming country and do not have some of the issues that exist in other nations.

Kevin Brennan: I will come on to that, but I say to the hon. Gentleman that changing the subject because he has a weak argument is not always the most powerful way to make his point. We are talking about tourism and the tourism industry. I praise Torbay—I spent many happy weeks enjoying holidays there as a child and a young man, and it is a wonderful destination.
My question is this: is the new weak pound—trading at parity with the euro in recent days, as I said—now the Government’s economic policy? Following Brexit, are the Conservatives now the party of devaluation? Surely not, because I thought stable, sound money and a strong, stable pound, with the discipline that brings to productivity, was one of the central principles of a Conservative Government. Apparently not. Hon. Members will have heard at Scotland Office questions today—I am sure they were all there—the Secretary of State for Scotland bragging about record numbers of people coming to this year’s Edinburgh Festival as a result of being attracted by the weak pound. Perhaps the Minister will confirm at the end of the debate that a weak pound is Government policy.

The effect on the pound is not the only impact of Brexit. Until the Government decide how freedom of movement is going to be reformed when we leave the EU, and how and whether those measures—[Interruption.] The hon. Member for Torbay (Kevin Foster) is free to intervene again if he wants to, rather than chuntering on from a sedentary position. Until the Government decide how and whether those measures will affect tourist entry into the UK, Britain’s accessibility as a tourist destination carries a lingering question mark, given that 73% of foreign visitors to the UK in 2015 were from Europe. Any uncertainty of that kind left unaddressed is extremely unhelpful. That point has been made by Conservative Members, though perhaps not in the way I would have made it.

Another concerning issue that has been mentioned is the importance of EU workers to the tourism sector. As has been said, tourism-related industries account for 9% of UK employment, and quite a high proportion of those workers are non-UK citizens, particularly in London. The Association of British Travel Agents and Deloitte published a report prior to the referendum outlining the potential consequences of Brexit on tourism, which stated that limits to the sector’s ability to employ people from outside the UK could lead to real difficulties in filling roles. It also found:

“Restrictions on employing EU nationals might thus exacerbate existing skills shortages. Ultimately this could have a detrimental effect on the sectors’ ability to serve consumers at the standard they expect.”

James Heappey: I agree with the shadow Minister. One of the advantages of the EU migrant workforce has been to provide a range of linguistic skills in a lot of our hotels and conference venues. If we are going to lose that, we could really do with some better language training in schools to replace it.

Kevin Brennan: I hope we are not going to lose it. I think we can have both, and that ought to be our aim going forward. I do not think the hon. Gentleman intended to say in any way that those people should be sent home and that we should, over a period of time, train their replacements. Of course we should improve language skills in our schools, and of course we should get more UK citizens to fill jobs in the tourism industry, but it is equally important that we do not suggest that we do not welcome diversity in our tourism industry in this country.

One problem is that some of the Government’s post-Brexit messaging is potentially damaging to Britain’s blue chip brand. At the Conservative party conference we saw the Home Secretary, seriously announce, at least in the headlines, a misguided policy of publicly listing foreign workers. The Government have subsequently clumsily withdrawn that, but we have seen all this before. I have seen this movie many times over: at the Conservative party conference, Ministers announce right-wing policies that deliver plenty of tabloid headlines and claps in the conference hall, but then inevitably row back from that extreme position in subsequent days. The problem is that their message is heard, not just in Britain but overseas.

I am afraid that xenophobic sentiment, at the service of inflamed rhetoric to generate a lurid headline, keep the tabloid editors happy and send out a dog whistle to the right, is an ugly thing. Shame on the Home Secretary for risking Britain’s reputation abroad for hospitality and tolerance for a few moments of glory on the front pages of the redtops. That sort of behaviour not only damages Britain’s brand abroad but ultimately shortchanges the British public. In the long run, British tourism will thrive not on the attractiveness of our weather but on the attractiveness of our welcome. It will thrive not because Britain is cheap because of the weak pound, but because Britain is rich in culture, heritage and hospitality. British tourism will flourish not by shrinking to little England slogans but by confidently projecting a greater Britain with a warm and open welcome to visitors to all of its parts—to Wales, to Northern Ireland, to Scotland and to England—often through the gateway of one of the world’s most diverse cities, London.

Coming from Cardiff, I should mention before I finish that the Champions League final will take place there next year, and we hope that the road to Cardiff will lead to many visitors coming from overseas. UK tourism needs greater clarity from the Government on Brexit and clearer messaging that we are open and welcoming to the world, and that we want people from across the world to come here to enjoy our heritage, our countryside, our modern cities and sometimes even our weather, but most of all to feel that they are welcome. Devaluing the pound may work to the tourism sector’s advantage for now, but devaluing our brand as a country will do the opposite. If that continues, it will cause lasting damage to our reputation and to our vital tourism industry.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): Before the Minister starts, she may be minded to leave a little bit of time for the mover of the motion to have the last word.

5.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Tracey Crouch): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Howarth. May I offer my congratulations to the hon. Member for Cardiff West (Kevin Brennan) on his appointment to his new role? I look forward to discussing this incredibly important issue with him on many occasions. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire (Nigel Huddleston) for raising this issue and giving me the opportunity to update the House on the position of the tourism sector following the momentous European Union referendum result in June this year.
It is fantastic to see so many colleagues here to talk about the amazing UK tourism sector. The industry’s diversity has been demonstrated by the number of different points raised by Members, in terms of both threats and opportunities. I do not have time to respond to each point in detail, but I hope that my speech will, at a higher level, reassure them that their specific issues have all been discussed.

I want to make a quick point for our colleagues from Scotland and Northern Ireland. They will be aware that tourism is a devolved issue. However, VisitBritain works to promote the whole of the UK, and what a wealth of attractions and visitor experiences it has to market. I recommend that Scottish colleagues in particular look up the Nessie hunting campaign, which was designed especially for the Scandinavian market and is excellent. While I am on this issue, colleagues who said that the budgets of VisitBritain and the “Great” campaign should be increased should feel free to write to the Chancellor and make their cases much more loudly.

As we know, the British people voted to leave the European Union, and the Prime Minister has been very clear that their will must be respected and delivered. The task is now to establish what that means for the UK and its people, which includes the challenges and opportunities currently faced by the British tourism and hospitality industries.

As others have done, I will quickly run through how important tourism is to the UK. The industry contributes more than £60 billion to our economy. In 2015, we saw the greatest number of overseas visits to the UK on record, bringing £22.1 billion into the economy. Domestic overnight spend also hit a record high of £19.6 billion in England, and the industry provides 1.6 million jobs across the country. In short, the sector has been going from strength to strength, and Britain’s tourism industry is likely to see further benefits as travel to the UK becomes more affordable and attractive to EU countries and international markets such as the USA, which is our highest value market. Moreover, domestic tourism and hospitality has seen a boost this summer, with more people deciding to holiday at home. We need to continue capitalising on such opportunities.

Figures released last month show that July was the highest month ever for inbound tourism to the UK, and overseas visitors to the UK spent £2.5 billion in July, which is 4% up on the same month last year. ONS figures also show that it was a record July for inbound visits from EU countries. Furthermore, there was strong growth from North America, including the US—which, as I said, is the UK’s most valuable visitor market—with visits up 5%. Visits from the rest of the world were also up 6%.

Overall international visitor figures from January to July were up 3% from 2015, and Chinese visits showed massive growth of 40% between April 2015 and March 2016 compared with the year before. Just under half of accommodation businesses surveyed after the Easter holidays to July stated that advance bookings were very good, which is a record for the VisitEngland tourism business confidence survey. I think we can all agree that those are encouraging signs.

We should not forget why tourism is so successful in this country. To put it simply, we have a great deal to offer. We have extraordinary heritage, beautiful landscapes, great sporting events and some of the finest museums in the world. That will not change in a post-Brexit world. That is proved by the news that has broken during this debate that we have won the bid to host the 2019 UCI road world championships in Yorkshire. That great sporting event will bring a huge boost to local tourism.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Worcestershire mentioned, we published the Prime Minister’s tourism action plan just before the August bank holiday. The document highlights our stunning scenery, monuments and cultural traditions, which will continue to draw visitors from both home and abroad. Furthermore, it reaffirms our commitment by setting out a series of new initiatives and measures to help Britain out-compete other major tourism destinations, to welcome more international visitors than ever before and to encourage more British people to holiday at home. It is vital to remember that our destinations, attractions and services across the UK will continue to deliver the same high-quality visitor experience to both domestic and international visitors as they always do. No matter what, the UK remains open for business, and we will always offer a warm welcome to our visitors.

Ronnie Cowan: I hear those wonderful figures on tourism across the UK, and I welcome them all, but my concern in Inverclyde is that we welcome more than 100,000 passengers off cruise ships every year. I wrote to the Minister for Immigration to clarify how we will handle visas. His response was, “The Prime Minister has been clear that Brexit means Brexit.” I am afraid that that does not wash with me. Will the Minister shine some more light on this very difficult area? We have the product, but we cannot stop people at the borders and turn them away.

Tracey Crouch: I am sure the hon. Gentleman appreciates that visas are a matter for the Home Office, but I can tell him that we work closely on that key issue with our Home Office colleagues. My hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) mentioned the new visa scheme between China and Britain, which is working very well, and I am sure we will look at that as a template for the future.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): I raise the issue of people actually getting here. At the moment, we are part of the open skies initiative, which allows our airlines—particularly our budget airlines—to fly backwards and forwards to Europe and between countries within Europe. If we are outside, is there going to be any immediate difference in the way people travel? The sector is strong and resilient and has overcome enormous challenges in the past such as incredible flooding in particular areas. The UK will continue to face growing competition from overseas destinations.
That has always been the case, but now is the time to think about how we can tackle this even better as we reshape our engagement.

I would like to explain what we are doing within the Department to engage with this important sector. The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport held a roundtable with the tourism sector at the beginning of August to give experts a more prominent voice in policy making and to listen and learn more about the new opportunities and challenges being faced. I followed that up with a Tourism Industry Council meeting last month. That has continued the honest and useful two-way conversations between the sector and Government.

Through the Tourism Alliance we have a long and thorough list of issues affecting the industry, some of which indicate a challenge but many of which highlight an opportunity. I mean this with the greatest respect to Members, but not one of them raised a new issue in the Chamber today. These are all issues we are well aware of and are working on with people within the sector. In fact, the list is much longer than those raised by Members today.

Our consultations have told us a great deal. For example, one important issue for the tourism and hospitality industries is the Government's priority to exercise more control on the numbers of people coming to the UK, the free movement of people from Europe and crucially, as Members have mentioned, how that will impact on employment. The tourism industry employs 1.6 million people, 9% of whom—that is 144,000 people—are EU nationals, and 6% of whom are migrants but not EU nationals. We have talent within the UK that we need to continue to promote and to retain. We must ensure we upskill the workforce, so that we can rely on our home-grown employment.

I am conscious of the time. All the issues raised today have been on the agenda and will continue to be. We take this incredibly seriously. It is an important sector for the future of the United Kingdom.

Nigel Huddleston: I thank the Minister for her response and am somewhat reassured by her comments. I look forward, along with all colleagues in the room—who are from all corners of the UK, which is very reassuring—to continuing the dialogue. This is a complicated issue. The fragmented nature of the industry means it is challenging to engage with, and I appreciate all the efforts being made. I look forward to continuing the dialogue through the APPG, the Culture, Media and Sport Committee and all sorts of other vehicles. I appreciate the Minister's response.

Mr George Howarth (in the Chair): May I thank those who have taken part in the debate for their co-operation? We managed to get everybody in who had applied to speak, although I am mildly disappointed that nobody thought to mention Knowsley safari park.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the potential effect of the UK leaving the EU on tourism.

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Thursday 13 October 2016

[Mr Graham Brady in the Chair]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Tobacco Control Plan

1.30 pm

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the tobacco control plan.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Brady. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting us the opportunity to debate this issue in the depth and detail required. The subject has an impact on all of us, and it is right that time is allocated for a meaningful and thorough debate. I am also grateful to my colleagues from across the House who helped to secure the debate and who will, I am sure, make some incisive and insightful contributions.

I am pleased to have been part of the team that has consistently advocated tobacco control, and I am proud of the achievements we have made. The great thing about those achievements is that they have been built on strong cross-party commitment in both Chambers, with the devoted support and drive of external organisations and charities across the country that are determined to keep the harm caused by tobacco very much in the minds of the public and, of course, Ministers. Those organisations have succeeded.

A recent Action on Smoking and Health survey of more than 12,000 people found overwhelming public support for Government action to limit smoking and strong support for the Government to go further and do more. That is no surprise, really, as tobacco control is an area where Government action is highly effective.

Let me start with a parochial statistic. Back in Stockton, 250 miles up the road, smoking prevalence was estimated at 27.5%—more than one in four people—as recently as a decade ago. However, by last year various policies and interventions had seen that figure fall to 18.4%, which is a decrease of about a third. That means that some 14,000 fewer adults in Stockton now smoke than in 2005. I, for one, am very proud of that achievement.

I speak not only as a member of the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health, the secretariat for which is provided by ASH, but as an MP who, as a humble Back Bencher, successfully pressed for the legal changes around smoking in cars when young children are present, with the support of groups including the British Lung Foundation, Cancer Research UK and the British Heart Foundation. That is on top of the principled and unwavering support I have received from north-east organisation Fresh, which covers my patch in Stockton North and whose joint conference on the harms of tobacco and alcohol I was pleased to address just a fortnight ago.

The dedication to improving public health and promoting tobacco control runs deep not only in my own psyche but in that of colleagues across the House. Back in 1998, the Labour Government introduced the country’s first comprehensive tobacco control strategy. Legislation has moved on since then to prohibit tobacco advertising, smoking in public places and smoking in cars carrying children, and to implement controls on point-of-sale displays. I welcomed all those measures, but I am only too aware that there is much more to be done.

The most recent measure was the introduction of standardised tobacco packaging, which I repeatedly called for and supported. Although the original form of the Children and Families Act 2014 contained no measures at all to protect children from the dangers of smoking or to avert uptake, the amendment on standardised packaging tabled in the House of Lords by Baronesses Finlay and Tyler and Lords Faulkner and McColl was swiftly taken up by the Government and brought to fruition.

In the spirit of debating the issues and the evidence base rather than the politics of any decision, I thank the previous public health Minister and current Financial Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison), for her consistent support for tobacco control and, in particular, standardised packaging. That was duly recognised by her receipt of the prestigious World Health Organisation director general’s special award to mark World No Tobacco Day earlier this year.

A great deal was achieved under the previous plan, “Healthy Lives, Healthy People: A Tobacco Control Plan for England”. Progressive tobacco control legislation was introduced, and the three key ambitions of the plan have been achieved. Smoking rates among adults and children have fallen below the target levels, and rates of smoking during pregnancy reached the 11% target earlier this year. That illustrates perfectly why Britain is a world leader in tobacco control, with the UK coming top in a European survey measuring the implementation of key tobacco control policies and passing legislation that goes further than the requirements set out in European Union directives—perhaps that is one area in which we can expect no negative impact from Brexit. Yet there is still much to be done.

Smoking is responsible for approximately 78,000 preventable and premature deaths each year in England alone, and nearly 100,000 across the UK. In the north-east, the number of deaths from smoking-related diseases is some 30% higher than the English average. Despite the fact that we have hit the national targets on smoking prevalence laid out in the previous plan, stark variations in prevalence persist regionally and among different groups. A national tobacco control strategy should therefore be introduced without delay.

In her Downing Street speech, the new Prime Minister committed her Government to “fighting against the burning injustice that if you’re born poor you will die on average nine years earlier than others”.

Half of that difference in life expectancy is solely due to higher rates of smoking among the least affluent members of our society, with smoking rates among those with multiple complex needs reaching as high as 80%. I am clear that we should all share that commitment.

In Stockton, just under 30,000 people smoke—that is just over 18% of the population. However, it has been estimated that 539 children between the ages of 11 and 15 start smoking in Stockton-on-Tees every year, with 964 people dying from smoking-attributable causes from 2012 to 2014. Shockingly, that is the equivalent of...
almost 5,000 years of life lost due to smoking. That death and disease is disproportionately borne by the poorest people in my area.

Although smoking rates among the adult population fell throughout the life of the previous tobacco control plan, health inequalities have remained stubbornly high. In 2013, for instance, smoking prevalence among people in the routine and manual socioeconomic group was more than twice that among the professional managerial group—28.6% compared with 12.9%. The picture is even worse for those who are unemployed, with smoking rates of approximately 35%. People earning under £10,000 a year are more than twice as likely to smoke as those earning more than £40,000 a year. The higher rates of smoking place a significant financial burden on poorer members of society. If the costs of smoking were returned to households, 1.1 million people, including more than 300,000 children, would be lifted out of poverty.

In Stockton-on-Tees, when tobacco expenditure is taken into account, almost 6,000 smokers fall below the poverty line, including more than 1,300 dependent children. Those innocent children not only suffer from the financial burden of their parents’ smoking but are more likely to be exposed to second-hand smoke and to try smoking themselves. We all know that those who grow up in a household where parents or siblings smoke are far more likely to become smokers themselves.

Those children may experience considerable peer pressure to start smoking, and tobacco is often more accessible to them in the community and at home, thus creating a cycle of inequality and leading to the life expectancy gap noted by the Prime Minister. Perhaps worse still is that when poorer smokers attempt to quit smoking, they are less likely to succeed than their more affluent peers.

To tackle inequalities, support to stop smoking needs to be specifically tailored to meet the needs of those in lower socioeconomic groups. Although the ambitions in the previous plan have been met and smoking rates continue to decline, they remain stubbornly high in disadvantaged sections of society. Further action is needed from the Government and the public sector to reduce smoking rates and associated health inequalities, and the new strategy is necessary to drive that action forward.

With that in mind, and given that the policy development work for a new tobacco control plan was in place for publication this summer, I would welcome the Minister telling us when the new plan will be published. I say to her that there is a standard to live up to, because the last time there was a debate about the plan in this room, the then Minister confirmed the timing of its publication. I hope we will hear about that in depth today.

Perhaps the Minister will also oblige the British Lung Foundation and outline the Government’s plans to prioritise lung health as an area for health improvement. Will she tell the House whether an assessment of respiratory health could be included in the NHS health check?

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way, and I very much agree with what he is saying. He has talked a lot about inequality, which of course spreads beyond this country. I understand that some 80% of smoking deaths, which will rise to 8 million by 2030, are in lower and middle-income countries. Does he share my desire to see the Government publish the plan before the meeting in India in November? We could then see what the special fund for developing countries will be used for, because we need to have an impact there, too.

Alex Cunningham: I agree. With the huge proportion of deaths in lower-income countries, which are suffering even more than we are in this country, it is imperative that the report is published so that we can show a lead. We are a leading country, if not the leading country, on smoking control, and we must continue to demonstrate that.

As colleagues will be aware, stop smoking services are one of the most effective healthcare interventions. Smokers are four times more likely to quit successfully with the combination of behavioural support and medication provided by those local services. Significantly, smokers from routine and manual socioeconomic groups are more likely to access the support of stop smoking services, which have real potential and are an effective way of beginning to address health inequalities. In 2014-15, for example, more than twice as many smokers from routine and manual groups set a quit date with a stop smoking service compared with those in professional and managerial occupations. Such services are not only effective in supporting efforts to quit but can prevent the disability and distress caused by smoking-related diseases without the side effects of many of the drugs used to treat such diseases. Indeed, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence considers smoking cessation treatment to be among the most cost-effective healthcare interventions.

Smoking cessation treatment is also cost-effective for those who already have smoke-related diseases. Take chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, for instance. Some 900,000 people in England have been diagnosed with smoking-related COPD, out of about 3 million sufferers. Some 25,000 people a year die from the disease, and the NHS spent £720 million on treatments in 2010-11. The British Lung Foundation estimates that in my constituency, people are as much as 60% more likely to be admitted to hospital with COPD than the UK average. We also discovered recently that the rate of lung disease in my constituency is the second worst in the country.

Yet COPD is a disease that is almost entirely preventable. Smoke is the cause of more than three quarters of COPD cases, and in this country exposure to such smoke is primarily through smoking. Although it is clearly better to prevent COPD through the provision of smoking cessation treatment to help smokers quit before the disease develops, that treatment can help improve quality of life even after the onset of COPD and is highly cost-effective compared with other treatments. Indeed, it is the only treatment that can prevent the disease from progressing in smokers. The cost of smoking cessation treatment for people with COPD is estimated to be £2,000 per quality-adjusted life year, whereas the cost of drug treatment for those with the disease ranges from £5,000 per QALY at the bottom end of the scale to £187,000 per QALY for triple therapy.

I am mindful that this is a co-operative debate with cross-party support, but I believe it is fair to highlight the impact of some of the Government’s economic measures on smoking cessation programmes. In 2014-15,
despite all the evidence of their cost-effectiveness, approximately 40% of local authorities cut the budgets of their stop smoking services, with half of all services being reconfigured or recommissioned. It is not just local authority cuts that are happening; we are now hearing that clinical commissioning groups are also cutting funding for prescriptions to stop smoking medications and refusing to fund smoking cessation services.

Local authorities faced with huge cuts to their budgets are reducing investment not only in stop smoking services but in other areas essential to effective tobacco control. Trading standards staff, who are crucial to tackling tobacco trade than has been seen at national level, to the benefit of both public health and Government revenues. Between 2009 and 2015 the illicit market declined by more than a third in the north-east, from 15% to 9%, whereas the decline at national level was less than a fifth, from 12% to 10%.

Without sustained funding, such services are simply unable to continue to operate effectively. The new tobacco control plan therefore needs to prioritise cutting health inequalities rather than budgets, and in so doing must protect public health funding for tobacco control. I hope the Minister will confirm today that the Government will take steps to sustain protected funding for tobacco control, and will outline what those steps will look like.

I would similarly welcome hearing the Minister commit to bringing mass media spending in line with best practice evidence. Research has shown mass media campaigns to be highly effective in promoting quit attempts and discouraging uptake. In the UK, however, we are currently falling far below best practice spending on such campaigns. When funding was cut back in 2010 there was a noticeably negative impact on quitting, with a whopping 98% decrease in requests for quit support packs, a fall of almost two thirds in quit-line calls and more than a third fewer website hits. That should hardly come as a surprise, with year-on-year cuts seeing only £5.3 million spent on mass media in 2015, which is less than a quarter of the amount spent in 2009. Spending has actually declined further this year to £4 million. To make matters worse, it is not even clear how much, if any, of that budget is reserved for televised mass media campaigns.

This year’s annual Stoptober campaign, for instance, is being run without any televised advertising. Yet the evidence confirms that it is precisely such mass media campaigns that are essential to motivate quitting and to inform smokers of the useful resources provided by Public Health England to help smokers quit. Those campaigns, which discourage smoking and encourage quitting, are most effective when they are sustained and sufficient, with the best results being achieved when people are exposed to televised anti-smoking adverts around four times a month.

Again, I draw attention to my own patch and the “Quit 16” mass media campaign co-ordinated by Fresh and Smokefree Yorkshire and Humber, which focused on the damage smoking does to health. Some 16% of those exposed to the campaign, or roughly 53,300 people, cut down on their smoking. A further 8.4% made a quit attempt, and 4% switched to electronic cigarettes. That shows the clear impact that mass media campaigns have on triggering quit attempts and changes in behaviour, and the Government need to take such evidence seriously and commit to investing in mass marketing campaigns without delay.

Members will be aware that the decline in smoking prevalence in the UK since the first comprehensive strategy was published in 1998 has been comparable to that in Canada and Australia, both of which have consistently addressed the harms caused by smoking through comprehensive and sustained tobacco control strategies. Smoking prevalence has declined rapidly among adults and children in England since the Government first implemented such strategies from 1998. The latest figures show that adult smoking prevalence in England has declined by more than a third, falling from 27% in 1998 to 16.9% last year. The proportion of 15-year-olds in England who are regular smokers fell by two thirds between 1998 and 2014, hitting 8%, and the proportion of 11 to 15-year-olds who have ever smoked fell from 47% to 18% over the same period. Those are the lowest figures ever recorded for both adults and children.

None the less, smoking remains the leading cause of preventable premature death and the major reason for differences in life expectancy between the richest and poorest in society. Experience elsewhere shows what can happen if we do not review and renew our tobacco control strategy and ensure that it is properly funded. While the UK has seen a significant decline in smoking because of its comprehensive approach, the prevalence of smoking in France and Germany, which have not had any such strategies in place, has barely shifted over the last 20 years. We cannot rest on our laurels and assume that the long-term declines we have achieved will continue unabated if we do not take decisive action to review and renew our strategy.

On 14 September, Lord Prior committed the Government to publishing a new plan, with renewed ambitions to reduce smoking prevalence further and new ambitions on health inequalities and mental health. However, he would not commit to a publication date, so I repeat my appeal to the Minister to reassure Members across the House by filling that gap today. There is no clear reason to delay publication of a new plan further. If the Prime Minister’s ambition to reduce health inequalities is to be achieved, Ministers need a comprehensive strategy on tobacco control sooner rather than later.

1.50 pm

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Brady. I commend the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) for his tireless campaign on tobacco control and for introducing the debate.

In 1974, 46% of adults smoked, but that figure has now fallen to 16.9%. That is not an accident; it has been because of the concerted action of campaigners, cross-party working and Government support over the years. It has
all been about price, marketing, availability, smoke-free environments, education, targeted support to help people to cut down and quit, and the availability of less harmful alternatives.

I also commend the Government and the Conservative-led coalition Government for their action over the past six years. We have seen an end to point-of-sale displays—the last refuge of advertising and marketing—and, finally, the introduction of standardised or what we might call “truth” packaging, which allows people to see the product and what it does to them. We have also seen further protection for children, with bans on proxy sales and on smoking in cars with children present.

The evidence shows that intervention saves lives, and in the case of smoking it saves lives very quickly. It can have a real effect in the same year on foetal, maternal and child health and on reducing cardiovascular disease and complications in surgery. It is definitely worth doing, both in the short and the long term. It should set a template for other public health measures, because it shows that they really make a difference and are definitely worthwhile.

As the hon. Member for Stockton North so clearly stated, however, these improvements do not mean we should be complacent. There are still 76,000 preventable and premature deaths a year as a result of smoking. Not only does that have a devastating impact on individuals and their families; it has other implications, not just for mortality but for the disease burden and the lives lived in very poor health. In my 24 years on the frontline in the NHS I saw that at first hand. Living with COPD and end-stage COPD is a dreadful burden on individuals.

There is also the cost to the NHS and the issue of health inequality, which we have heard about already. The cost to the NHS is about £2 billion a year. If we are to look at the long-term sustainability of our NHS, we must tackle that. Things can be done. Almost a quarter of hospital admissions for lung disease are attributable to smoking; we can do better on that.

As the hon. Member for Stockton North pointed out, the Prime Minister spoke in her first speech on the steps of Downing Street about the “burning injustice” of the life expectancy gap between rich and poor. I absolutely support her determination to tackle that; we need to tackle that. Things can be done. Almost a quarter of hospital admissions for lung disease are attributable to smoking; we can do better on that.

Of course, health inequality is a multi-factor problem. It is not just about issues such as smoking and obesity—that are many other important issues, such as education, poverty and housing—but we can make a difference both quickly and in the long term by continuing to tackle smoking. I really hope the Minister will acknowledge that it is about preventing new smokers from coming on board, helping existing smokers to cut down and quit, and imposing greater responsibility and accountability on the industry. The five year forward view rightly calls for a radical upgrade in prevention and public health, which is essential for the long-term sustainability of the NHS. Now is not the time to cut back on the services that deliver prevention and help for people to cut down and quit, but sadly that is what is happening.

I am afraid a lot comes down to budget. In 2015, we saw a £200 million in-year cut to public health budgets, and that is set to continue. The Health Committee’s recent inquiry into public health, which has now reported, found that there will be a real-terms reduction in public health budgets from £3.47 billion in 2015 to £3 billion by 2021. That will hit front-line services. Around 4.1% of total health spending is currently in public health, and that percentage is definitely set to decline, which is absolutely a false economy. We should be investing now to make the savings we need for the future—not just for individuals, though of course they should be the priority, but for the long-term sustainability of the NHS. That would be cost-effective.

We are already seeing the impact on front-line services: local authority stop smoking services have been decommissioned in Manchester, for example, and in Worcestershire they are now available only to pregnant women. We also need to look at how CCGs are withdrawing their support for GPs to prescribe nicotine replacement therapy. That is worrying, because there is a very clear evidence base for such services, as we have heard—I will not repeat what the hon. Member for Stockton North set out so eloquently. Cutting them is the worst example of poor value for money and letting people down. I really hope that when devising an effective strategy the Minister will look at that and make sure that those services are available, both within local authorities and at the frontline of NHS services.

As a former GP, I know the role GPs can play in persuading those who are in the most danger, because they see people when they are suffering the complications of smoking and their intervention at that point is often the trigger for people to quit effectively. But GPs are now left in a position where they cannot prescribe the products that we know might help patients. We absolutely must not abandon one of the most cost-effective measures in healthcare, and we must not add extra cost to the future.

Members in the main Chamber of the House of Commons are discussing baby loss this afternoon, and I am sorry that none of us can be in two places at once. However, it is essential to remember that if the Government are to succeed in their aim to reduce neonatal stillbirths and maternal deaths by 50% by 2030, we have to consider maternal smoking. Sadly, around 300 perinatal deaths every year are attributable to smoking. There are very important reasons across the board for tackling this.

Finally, I will touch on the issue of e-cigarettes, because there is some controversy around them. Some people fear that the industry will take over and that e-cigarettes will become a gateway into smoking, but the evidence so far does not support that. Of course we need to be vigilant and make sure that these products are not being marketed to children to push nicotine addiction, which then steps on to smoking, but so far the evidence is not there. Nevertheless, we need to watch the marketing side of things.

There is no doubt that for many people e-cigarettes are a gateway out of smoking or a way to reduce the amount that they use. It is estimated that in 2015 around 18,000 long-term smokers were helped to cut down and quit by such products. We should be encouraging
their use, because the evidence supports that. We are currently members of the European Union and so subject to the tobacco directive, which will mean further restrictions on the use of e-cigarettes. Will the Minister confirm that she will look carefully at the emerging evidence to see where we want to fit in with and adopt that directive and, perhaps, where we feel that it might not be appropriate for the UK? It is an emerging picture, but the overall message should be that we should encourage the use of e-cigarettes and make them available to people when they need to use them.

I know that other Members wish to speak, so I shall not detain the House any further, other than to say that, like the hon. Member for Stockton North, I hope the Minister will be able to confirm today the timetable for the introduction of the tobacco control plan. I know that she will be personally determined to ensure it is effective.

2.1 pm

Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): I declare an interest: I speak as a vice-chairman of the all-party group on smoking and health, the secretariat of which is supported by Action on Smoking and Health, a national charity.

I echo the thanks expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) to the previous public health minister, the hon. Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison), for all the work she did and her commitment to support for tobacco control. I welcome the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Nicola Blackwood), to her new post; I hope that we can work together on this important issue. The previous four public health ministers, under either the current Administration or the coalition Government, have worked very well with the all-party group and other Members who want to see progress on this issue. I also welcome my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) to her new role as shadow public health minister. She is going to have to get used to seeing us, as she is going to be in here quite regularly.

It was in December that I last spoke in Westminster Hall on tobacco control. I was highlighting the fact that the tobacco control plan for England, “Healthy Lives, Healthy People”, was soon to expire, and that a new plan was needed to ensure sustained funding for tobacco control was needed. I rise today for the same purpose. England has now gone 10 months without a comprehensive strategy on tobacco control. The House was assured that a new plan would be published in the summer. I know that some political summers lapse into the autumn, but I stand here in October wondering whether this summer is going to lapse into the spring. I hope that is not the case. The Government have since stated that a publication date will be decided in due course.

I am proud that tobacco control is no longer a partisan issue but enjoys the benefits of support from all parties in this House and in the other place. However, Parliament cannot act alone. We need a Government strategy to ensure that in this period of austerity tobacco control does not slip off the agenda and that local authorities continue to see it as a crucial part of their work. The hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) referred to Manchester in her speech. It was deeply worrying to hear what she said, because I have no doubt that, although Manchester is a much bigger place, its socioeconomic profile will be like that of my own borough of Rotherham, where, sadly, a lot of people participate in smoking.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North commented on the impact of smoking in his constituency; my constituency, Rother Valley, is similarly hit by the burden of smoking. Approximately 13,660 people in Rother Valley smoke, and across the three borough constituencies of Rotherham nearly 1,500 people died prematurely from smoking between 2012 and 2014. We know the national figure and I have to say, as I have always said in similar debates, that if we were losing our fellow citizens on such a scale from any other cause—whether it was an intervention in a war or anything else—we would be much more concerned than we seem to be about people tragically dying so prematurely.

Smoking has such a dreadful impact on communities. Surveys of smokers show that around two thirds want to quit smoking and that that desire to quit is the same across population groups. However, only around a third of smokers make a quit attempt each year, and the number of people accessing NHS stop smoking services is declining. A new plan is needed to set out continued support for those people by encouraging them to make quit attempts and to access services that can offer support. Smokers are four times more likely to quit with the help of the expert support provided by stop smoking services, but a new plan is needed to guarantee funding for such services, which are currently under threat.

I have been contacted on this issue by Teresa Roche, Rotherham’s director of public health, and Councillor David Roche, Rotherham Council’s cabinet member responsible for this subject. I do not think they are related, but somebody in my office once asked whether they were. I am not too sure at this stage, but the next time I meet them I shall find out. They are part of the ambitious plan in Yorkshire and the Humber to inspire a generation free from tobacco by 2025. However, their work requires funding. I ask that that be addressed in the strategy, when it is published. The percentage of adults who smoke is falling, but the fall has been even better among teenagers and young children. Back in 1993-94, I introduced a private Member’s Bill against the advertising and promotion of tobacco. At that time, the levels of smoking among both the adult and teenage populations were far higher. Work to discourage smoking is working, and it is saving lives.

International evidence shows that funding for tobacco control activities is crucial. Members who attended the debate in December may recall me describing the situation in New York, where smoking rates declined consistently until 2010, when funding for tobacco control was cut. Smoking prevalence then began to increase until 2014, when funding was reinstated and smoking rates began to decline once more. That is one example of the well-known fact that tobacco control needs sustained funding in order to be effective. As was said earlier, after the change of Government in 2010, the removal of social marketing in the national media was clearly followed by a decline in the number of people stopping smoking. There is a direct correlation.

Funding is needed not only to secure the future of stop smoking services, but for mass media campaigns to encourage smokers to quit. We must keep them up.
I understand that this year the Stoptober campaign has moved online, utilising resources such as Facebook Messenger—something on which I have to say I am no expert—to support people who are attempting to quit.

Alex Cunningham: It is all very well having online services, but people need to have access to those services. I know that everybody thinks every kid from a poor home has a smartphone, but that is not true. If they do not have access to IT services, they cannot benefit from the services my right hon. Friend is describing.

Kevin Barron: I accept that entirely. We hear all the time about people getting online to claim their benefits or whatever else, but it is quite clear that not everybody has access. Nevertheless, we are in the 21st century now and we have moved on a little. We can now sit in this Chamber using our phones for things that would have required an office 20 years ago, so we must remember that things are moving on. I do agree with my hon. Friend, though.

The Stoptober campaign will be delivered at a fraction of the cost by using new media. I await with anticipation the evaluation of its effectiveness compared with previous campaigns that have used a broader range of outlets, including TV and print media. Effective tobacco control needs to be comprehensive, encompassing all these activities to support smokers and to promote systems-wide action to dissuade people from taking up smoking.

Quitting smoking is incredibly difficult. As we have heard, electronic cigarettes are now used by over 2.5 million people in the UK; some people estimate that the figure is 2.8 million. They give smokers access to a significantly less harmful source of nicotine and help individuals to give up tobacco. Evidence from the Royal College of Physicians—I should say here that I am an honorary fellow of that body, before it gets into the newspapers. There is no payment for that. None the less, I ought to say that I use my personal experience in these matters. Evidence from the royal college and from Public Health England shows that vaping is around 95% less harmful than smoking cigarettes.

Two new publications have further supported the argument that electronic cigarettes can make it easier to quit smoking without posing significant health risks. The first is a systematic review of the evidence from the Cochrane Tobacco Addiction Group. Such reviews are generally considered to be authoritative summaries of the current scientific evidence. The results show that electronic cigarettes containing nicotine significantly increased the chance of quitting smoking, while not showing any adverse health effects within two years of use. I know that there are some people outside who say, “We’ve got to see what this is like over decades to make sure they are perfectly safe”. I am afraid that we would have to wait decades to be able to see that. What we should concentrate on is the scientific evidence that we have available since the introduction of electronic cigarettes and make judgments on that.

The second publication has already been mentioned by the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston). A number of newspapers have picked up on the researchers’ estimate that in 2015 electronic cigarettes helped an additional 18,000 people to quit smoking. That illustrates how electronic cigarettes have the potential to be a huge public health innovation. There is growing consensus, including charities such as the British Lung Foundation, Cancer Research UK and the Royal College of Physicians, that electronic cigarettes are a very useful tool for smoking cessation.

We all know that smoking is responsible for approximately 96,000 premature deaths across the UK, which is more than the number of deaths caused by the next six biggest causes of preventable deaths in the UK, including obesity, alcohol and illegal drugs. Electronic cigarettes have amazing potential to reduce that burden of death and disease. The Tobacco and Related Products Regulations 2016, which came into effect in May, aim to maximise the benefits from these products within a properly regulated framework. There is a clear role for electronic cigarettes as a form of tobacco harm reduction, but regulation is needed to ensure manufacturing quality and to dissuade non-smokers, including young people and children, from taking up vaping. In the UK, there is no significant evidence that non-smokers are taking up vaping, or that electronic cigarettes are acting as a gateway to smoking. However, it is proportionate to the risks posed by nicotine in any form that these products are regulated.

I wish that people would get over the fact that some of the owners of the companies that make these products happen to be tobacco companies. I do not think anyone has battled more against tobacco in this House than I have for two decades now. However, tobacco companies grow tobacco; tobacco contains nicotine; and nicotine is addictive. It is 90% safer to take nicotine through vaping than through a cigarette, and I wish that people out there who listen to these debates would recognise that fact and stop knocking on about who owns the companies that make these products. The quality of people’s lives is improving in taking people off this drug, which prematurely ends the life of 50% of people who smoke cigarettes. That is what we should concentrate on.

Before the summer recess, on 4 July, Lord Prior announced in a debate in the other place that those regulations would be reviewed within five years to ensure that they were fulfilling the aims of supporting smokers to quit, preventing uptake among non-smokers and young people, and providing appropriate regulation of products containing nicotine, including a route to medicinal licensing. Although I understand that that might be affected by Brexit, I would be grateful if the Minister could confirm that that is still the plan. I know that Brexit is something that nobody knows about, other than it is Brexit at this stage, but these are crucial, potentially life-saving things for many of our citizens and this is an issue that we need to address.

Lord Prior also committed to commissioning Public Health England to update its evidence report on e-cigarettes annually until the end of this Parliament, and to include within that its quit smoking campaign’s consistent messaging about the safety of e-cigarettes. Can the Minister tell us when Public Health England’s review and updating of the evidence for 2016 will be published, and what message about electronic cigarettes has been included in the Stoptober campaign? The one that was published by Public Health England and others in August 2015 about e-cigarettes was truly ground-breaking in showing how people with a nicotine addiction can help to save themselves...
2.16 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Thank you, Mr Brady, for calling me to speak; it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

It is also a pleasure to follow the speech made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron), as I will call him in this context. I thought that it was thoughtful and, as always, well argued in its treatment of the data.

I place on the record my congratulations to the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) on securing this debate, and I also congratulate my colleagues on the Backbench Business Committee on allowing it to take place. No doubt the Health Department considers itself extremely challenged by having to respond to a debate in Westminster Hall and to two debates in the main Chamber on the same day.

I also put on the record my congratulations to the Financial Secretary to the Treasury, my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison), on all the work she did for public health. Indeed, a lot of the reforms that have been made and that we are talking about today came under her stewardship.

I also congratulate the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Nicola Blackwood), on securing her ministerial position. We are all looking forward to hearing her speak later on. As she is a former chairman of the Science and Technology Committee, I suspect that she will examine the scientific data and the important evidence before moving on; we look forward to that taking place.

On that subject, I echo what has already been said, namely that smoking is the No.1 public health challenge in the UK. As has been mentioned, there are almost 100,000 premature deaths every year across the whole country as a result of smoking. The fact that adding together the number of deaths caused by the next six biggest causes of preventable deaths would still not exceed the number of deaths caused by the No.1 cause of preventable death suggests that we have to address this matter. However, there is a risk that, because of the success of the tobacco control programme over the last five years, people will think the job is done. Well, I have to say that it is most certainly not done.

I declare my interest as the chairman of the all-party group on smoking and health and, as someone who has been an avowed anti-smoker all my life, I will continue to oppose smoking. I take the view that there are two categories of people here. We have to help people to stop smoking, but even more importantly we have to prevent people from starting to smoke, because we know that once people are addicted it is a very difficult job for them to give up their addiction.

As the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) said, we have been very successful. In the 1970s, more than 50% of the adult population smoked; that figure is now down to below 20%. That is good news. However, it still means that there is a stubborn minority and we have to get across to them how damaging it is to their health to continue smoking.

Success in this area has not happened by accident. Governments of all persuasions—including the current Government, the coalition Government before that and the Labour Government before that—have done enormous amounts of work to reduce the prevalence of smoking. Health professionals have also contributed to that, as have civil society organisations.

The position now is that the tobacco control programme finished at the end of last year. That is the reality and we need to see the new programme as soon as possible.

On this side of the House it is not unusual to hear people argue that the smoking habit is none of the Government’s business. Of course, it is an important source of tax revenue, but some people say—they are not necessarily employed or funded by the tobacco industry—that those who choose to smoke understand the risks, and have exercised their free consumer choice. I would say that informed choice and people understanding the damage they are doing to themselves is up to them, but that does not mean that we should not increase the pressure on those individuals to understand the damage they are doing to themselves and to others by continuing to smoke. I seek to make sure that we continue with the regulations and ramp up the tobacco control programme. We will soon see a situation where all cigarettes and hand-rolled tobacco are sold in standardised packaging, which has been a huge advance. We should take credit for that. Together in this Chamber, we changed Government policy through the force of our argument and the data that we provided in evidence.

I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is among the group that understands that the state and the Government have to interfere in this process. In her recent speech, she said that “government can and should be a force for good… the state exists to provide what individual people, communities and markets cannot; and… we should employ the power of government for the good of the people.”

I say that she is absolutely right, and that, on tobacco control, the position is quite clear. In her very first speech as party leader, she promised to fight “the burning injustice that, if you’re born poor, you will die on average 9 years earlier than others.”

That injustice is a clear issue for tobacco.

It would be very hard to find a more dysfunctional market than the one controlled by four of the most profitable companies in the world, who make their money selling products that they know will kill half of their lifetime customers—products that have been carefully...
designed to deliver a highly addictive drug, as fast as possible, to the brains of their users. If anyone were attempting to invent such a drug today, they would not get away with it, but these companies are quite clear in what they set out to do. The estimates by the US National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse of capture rates for both legal and illegal drugs demonstrate that point powerfully. Capture rates are the percentage of users who report that they have become dependent on the drug at some point. Tobacco has a capture rate of almost a third, more than for heroin, cocaine, alcohol and cannabis. It is clear that the tobacco companies deliberately set out to ensure that their customers are addicted to the drug.

Dependency is a combination of physical and psychological factors. Social and economic factors, such as the relative availability of different drugs, when and where they can be used in a socially acceptable way, and how affordable they are, all have an impact and smoking is therefore a major contributor to poverty and health inequality. As the Marmot review concluded in 2010, smoking in the UK accounts for about half the difference in life expectancy between different social classes, and so the important commitment that the Prime Minister has made to tackling what she rightly calls this “burning injustice” cannot be met without further action on reducing smoking rates.

In my borough, Harrow, analysis based on the 2015 integrated household survey shows that about 13% of the working-age population smoke, which is above the UK average, and equates to about 25,000 people. Of the roughly 15,700 households in Harrow that include a smoker, 2,700 fall below the poverty line. About 1,000 would rise above that line if all smokers in poor households were to quit. A lot of people refer to my borough as a nice, leafy borough, but it is important to understand that there are levels of deprivation all across the country— with respect to the hon. Members opposite, it is not confined to the north and the industrial cities.

Despite that fact, I am pleased that Harrow Council has decided to consult on stopping the smoking cessation services in an attempt to save money, but I am pleased that a large petition has been initiated by consultants at Northwick Park hospital with the aim of combating that and preventing it from happening. As my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes noted, stopping smoking cessation services would be a stupid move and would increase pressure on the health service and on individuals.

I would also add that, whatever one’s views on Brexit, the reality is that over the last five years more than 10,000 adults from eastern Europe have come to live in my constituency and almost all those of adult age smoke. The tobacco control programme needs to include encouraging people to give up by reaching parts that have not been reached previously.

One important lesson that we have learned from previous control programmes is that efforts to reduce smoking must be sustained and progressive; sustained because, as I have said, nicotine is a powerful drug, it increases dependency and requires powerful interventions to persuade people to quit; and progressive because people who continue to use tobacco after the control programmes are in place can be said to have discounted their effect. For example, many smokers quit after the introduction of the workplace ban in 2006, but most did not. The need for progressive steps is particularly important when it comes to tax and price policy, because the economic impacts of tax rises on reducing demand for tobacco products depend not simply on absolute price levels, but on affordability. If taxes rise more slowly than incomes, tobacco will become more, not less, affordable and consumption will tend to rise, not fall.

That point is well understood by the four major tobacco companies, which routinely use what they call “overshifting” as a pricing device. When the Government put up taxes, the companies raise the price of their so-called luxury brands by more than the amount required by the tax increase, while raising the price of the economy brands by less than the tax increase, or in some cases not at all, so that as many low-income smokers as possible are encouraged to continue with their habit or to start smoking in the first place. That has resulted in increasing brand segmentation in the tobacco market, and was cheerfully admitted by the companies in written evidence in their recent unsuccessful court challenge against standardised packaging. One of the most important secondary benefits of standardised packaging, over and above the removal of the last permitted form of advertising and marketing of tobacco products, is likely to be the gradual collapse of this approach to marketing. The brand value of a luxury packet of cigarettes is likely to be greatly reduced when it can no longer be highly designed, but instead must consist of drab, olive colours and large photos of diseased lungs and eyeballs. It is likely to mean that future tobacco tax prices are more effective in encouraging smokers to quit, as the different brand values and prices collapse towards a middle price. If we increased tobacco prices above the escalators and ensured that the money was given to public health for prevention and cessation measures, it would be welcome.

Tobacco control policies work best in combination and should not be planned and assessed in isolation. For example, standardised packaging will no doubt encourage many smokers to try to quit, but most quit attempts fail. Smokers who try to quit have a much greater chance of success if they can get help from stop smoking services and a prescription for nicotine replacement products, whether that is patches, gum or electronic cigarettes. That will all help towards people quitting, and so it is extremely disturbing to see the results from Action on Smoking and Health’s latest survey of tobacco control work in local authorities.

ASH asked control experts from 126 local authorities about their smoking policies and budgets. Its evidence shows that funding is being cut back in two out of five areas and that half of all services are being reconfigured or commissioned, which largely seems to be with the intention of saving money, not saving people’s lives and improving their health. I completely understand the need to control public expenditure, and I know that that often requires local authorities around the country to make difficult decisions, but if that leads to closures and reductions in this vital area of public health work, there is definitely a need for some very urgent rethinking.

Alex Cunningham: Colleagues in clinical commissioning groups in my area tell me that they would love to spend much more money on preventative services, but they are too busy spending money on treating and curing people to invest in the longer term. Does the hon. Gentleman
think there is a case for providing ring-fenced funding for public health and saying, “Let’s spend this great tranche of money now and do the preventative stuff, and get the benefits 20 years down the road.”

**Bob Blackman:** We should remember that when public health was devolved to local authorities, the money was ring-fenced. I pointed out to Ministers at the time that removing that ring fence would put at risk all public health expenditure, which can be squeezed. I think that is precisely what is happening. We are in danger of undoing all the good work that local authorities have done on public health by allowing that to happen. I, too, would welcome a ring-fencing of money for purposes such as this. We can see clearly that this is a particularly good, important service.

I am also concerned about the progressive reductions in the money spent on mass-media campaigns. As has already been mentioned, the money is going down. In 2015 we spent less than a quarter of the amount that was spent in 2009, and it looks like the spending is going to fall again this year. As has been mentioned, the Stoptober campaign is now only going to be online, with no television advertising. The benefit of large-scale television advertising is that it reaches people who are likely to smoke, so we need to look at that again.

Given the appalling damage that the tobacco industry causes, and given that those major companies are vastly profitable, I cannot see why they should not be asked to make a greater financial contribution to help solve the public health disaster that they worked so hard to create. I cannot imagine a more obvious application of the principle that the polluter should pay. I would very much like to see that commitment included in the new, overdue control plan for England.

Colleagues will remember that last December, when we had a Backbench Business debate on this subject, the previous Health Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea, announced that the tobacco control programme would be published this summer. I know that spring extends as far as November in some Government quarters, but in this case summer seems to be extending into next year. I am seriously worried, because we have reached the autumn and there is no plan in place and no date for publication. The previous plan was an excellent means of combating the appalling diseases, including cancer, pulmonary diseases, vascular diseases and various other things that are caused by smoking. It helped to improve matters and added many years to the lives of thousands of people across the UK.

Some colleagues may think that an intervention in the market is not required, but I think one is needed more than ever before. Since the programme was first published in 1998, the fall in our smoking rates has been similar to that of Canada and Australia, as has been mentioned. In France and Germany, which do not have similar to that of Canada and Australia, as has been mentioned. In France and Germany, which do not have similar to that of Canada and Australia, as has been mentioned. In France and Germany, which do not have_similar to that of Canada and Australia, as has been mentioned. In France and Germany, which do not have_similar to that of Canada and Australia, as has been mentioned. In France and Germany, which do not have_strategic, the rates have hardly changed in 20 years. The evidence shows that these programmes work, and that where there is no programme there is no movement forward.

The UK has an excellent record on tobacco control. The Department of Health was rightly given the prestigious Luther L. Terry award last year by the American Cancer Society for its global leadership on the issue, and the UK was ranked as the world’s most successful country on tobacco control by the Association of European Cancer Leagues. We should never forget that two of the biggest tobacco firms in the world, British American Tobacco and Imperial, are based in the UK, along with Gallaher, which is now an important part of Japan Tobacco International. We simply cannot sit back and watch smoking rates fall in the UK while the tobacco industry puts more time and money into increasing consumption in developing countries.

The next conference of parties of the World Health Organisation Framework Convention on Tobacco Control takes place in India in November—next month. We are in an Indian summer, and the tobacco programme will be published in the summer, so what would be better than publishing the plan in advance of the conference in India? That would set the UK, once again, on the world leadership level.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister, in her response, will give a firm and early date for publication. I hope that the plan will set ambitious targets to cut health inequalities, deal with the funding crisis affecting tobacco control work in local authorities and set specific targets to reduce smoking among vulnerable groups, including, as my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes said, pregnant women and people with mental health problems. The targets for the past five years of the programme seemed difficult, but they have all been achieved, so we should set challenging targets now that will lead to a smoke-free Britain. That has got to be our ultimate aim.

I strongly believe that tobacco control is an essential part of policy. It will enable the Prime Minister to achieve her commitments on good government and reducing health inequality. I pay tribute to the work of colleagues from all parties and in both Houses, who pressed the need for tobacco control legislation on sometimes reluctant Governments, which I consider to be one of the most important political and social advances during my time in Parliament. I hope that that work will continue until the death, disease and misery caused by smoking is finally consigned to the past. I look forward to hearing positive news from my hon. Friend the Minister about when we are going to set out the new challenges for the industry and the Department.

**2.37 pm**

**Norman Lamb** (North Norfolk) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Brady, and to follow the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). I find myself in agreement with everything he said. Anyone who has come here hoping to see violent disagreement and robust debate will be disappointed, because we all agree about the importance of this issue.

The hon. Gentleman talked clearly about the nature of this lethal product, which, as we have heard, kills 96,000 people a year across the UK. He also touched on the issue of the developing world. It is anticipated that 8 million people across our world will die from smoking in 2050, and that 80% of them will be in low or middle-income countries that do not have strategies to tackle the problem. Companies based in this country are selling this lethal product to the developing world and killing so many people. We need to be clear that that is shameful.

Many hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) and the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham)—I congratulate him on all
the work he has done and on leading this debate—have talked about the inequalities that are associated with smoking tobacco, including wealth and income inequalities. Smoking hits people from low-income communities much harder than others. As Members have said, smoking is about half of the reason for the difference in life expectancy between the richest and the poorest in our country.

I want to talk about another inequality, which the hon. Member for Harrow East touched on at the end of his contribution: the impact on people with mental ill health. A substantial part of the reason why such people, particularly those with severe and enduring mental ill health, die 15 to 20 years earlier than others is higher smoking rates. Here’s the thing: we have been very successful in this country—I will come back to this in a moment—at reducing the smoking rate. Public health strategies have worked effectively, although we all recognise that there is much further to go. But as the smoking rate has come down in the population as a whole, it has remained stubbornly high among those with severe and enduring mental ill health; there has been hardly any shift at all. That has been a failure of public health strategies.

Back in 2013, when the smoking rate across the population was 21%, it was 40% among those with severe and enduring mental ill health, 60% among those with psychosis, and 70% among people in in-patient care. We can start to see why those people end up dying so much earlier than everyone else. That amounts to a neglect of those people’s need for support in combating this highly addictive product, and it makes me absolutely horrified. As Members have said, smoking can be used in institutions where, for control reasons, it is difficult to keep the customer satisfied, as it were.

Let me come back to the successes of smoking cessation strategies. I join other hon. Members in congratulating the hon. Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison) on her work. The hon. Member for Harrow East was right; there are Government Members who take a different view. I remember hearing the hon. Member for Battersea speaking and wanting to tell her to watch her back, because there were quite a few Members behind her who took a different view. She was brave in standing her ground, particularly in pursuing the plain packaging policy. The right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron) has a plain packet in his pocket. The previous Government were in my view a coalition Government, not a Conservative-led Government; the Liberal Democrats played our part in important strategies such as plain packaging and ending smoking in cars with children on board, which will have a big impact on saving people’s lives.

It is imperative that the new strategy is published and becomes operational. Given the leadership role that we have played for so many years, it is important that we go to the meeting in India in November and demonstrate our continued leadership. If there is any way for the strategy to be published before that meeting, and for it to include a focus on how we will use the fund that has been established for combating smoking in developing countries, I urge the Minister to do everything possible to ensure that that happens.

Let me speak a little more about what the tobacco control plan needs to include. I come back to what I said about mental health, which the plan needs to address directly. I do not know whether the Minister has seen the iterations of the plan, which we hope will be published soon, but I hope very much that it will address directly the failure of public health strategies to reduce smoking among people with mental ill health. The plan needs to focus on the recommendations of the report “The Stolen Years”, which was published by ASH and produced in collaboration with the Royal College of Psychiatrists, and its ambitious targets for reducing smoking among people with mental ill health. We can no longer fail to confront the failure of past strategies in that respect. Interestingly, that report highlights the therapeutic benefits of stopping smoking for people with mental ill health, not only for their physical health but for their mental health. Ironically, many people with mental ill health smoke because they see it as an escape from the pain that they are suffering and a way of coping with stress, yet smoking increases stress and the risk of aggression, particularly in in-patient services.

Kevin Barron: I went to the launch of that report. Some 70% of people who are discharged from mental health secure units smoke, yet we have in our midst a product—e-cigarettes—that could have been designed to be put into such institutions, some of which are now putting e-cigarettes on their shopping lists. That would allow people to satisfy their addiction without creating secondary smoke and the many ailments that occur when people smoke. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that we need more leadership to ensure that e-cigarettes can be used in institutions where, for control reasons, it is difficult to keep the customer satisfied, as it were?

Norman Lamb: I completely agree. If we want to focus effort where it is most needed and where smoking rates are highest, we should focus on those very mental health institutions. As well as making vaping available for people who need help to give up smoking, we need to do much more to focus on training staff in such institutions so that they know the importance of smoking cessation being one of the objectives in the care of individuals there, because of its potential therapeutic benefit.

I should also mention the move towards smoke-free in-patient settings, a strategy that I supported as Minister and that I am pleased is continuing. Guidance was published by Public Health England and NHS England in June 2015, and that strategy is having a beneficial effect on the environment in in-patient settings by reducing aggression and stress and improving physical and mental health. I encourage the Government to keep pursuing that objective.

On electronic cigarettes and vaping, although I was a committed remainder in the EU referendum debate, the tobacco products directive is flawed, because it takes an inappropriately tough approach to electronic cigarettes. I therefore hope that the Government will review that directive regularly. One of the potential benefits of leaving the EU—there are not many, in my view—is that we will gain the ability to differentiate more between the effective regulation on tobacco in that directive and the regulation on electronic cigarettes, and do much more to recognise the evidence that already exists, as the right hon. Gentleman has made clear, on the benefits of electronic cigarettes.
I will end by saying something about public health funding. The hon. Member for Totnes made the point clearly, and I totally share her view. The Health Committee has pointed out that the £8 billion or £10 billion that we keep being told will be given to the NHS by 2020 is actually nearer £4.5 billion. Extra money is being found for front-line NHS services partly by cutting other parts of the Department of Health budget, including, distressingly, public health and health education. As she said, that is completely counterproductive. When NHS finances get tight, crisis management takes over. The hon. Member for Stockton North made the point that CCGs are focusing on propping up established traditional services—the repair services, as it were—and in so doing, tragically, are cutting the prevention services that prevent people from ending up needing care in the first place. That is so counterproductive. A new settlement for the NHS and the care system, which I keep calling for, must recognise the imperative to invest more in prevention and public health, particularly given that there is so much evidence that that has a beneficial effect.

2.49 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Brady. I thank the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) for bringing forward this interesting debate. I should say that I have never smoked a cigarette in my life, so if I start coughing, as I have been doing throughout the week, that is purely down to a bug that I have picked up.

When the Scottish Parliament brought in its smoking ban in 2006, I thought it was a birthday present, because it was brought in on 26 March, which is my birthday. Since 2007 my party has been in power in Scotland, where we do things a little bit differently. However, there are many parallels on this issue. The latest figures from Scotland show that tobacco use is associated with more than 10,000 deaths and about 128,000 hospital admissions every single year. It costs the NHS in Scotland £400 million to treat smoking-related illness, which highlights the scale of the problem across the UK.

The Scottish Government have implemented and overseen a number of progressive actions on smoking: increasing the age for tobacco sales from 16 to 18 in 2007; the overhaul of tobacco sale and display law; including legislation to ban automatic tobacco vending machines and a ban on the display of tobacco and smoking-related products in shops; the establishment of the first tobacco retail register in the UK in 2011; and the passing of a Bill in December 2015 to ban smoking in cars when children are present. Record investment in NHS smoking cessation services has helped hundreds of thousands of people to attempt to quit smoking.

This year, the Scottish Parliament celebrated the 10th anniversary of the ban on smoking in public and welcomed comments from the World Health Organisation, which praised the Scottish Government’s “excellent example of global public health leadership” for implementing its framework convention on tobacco control. In 2013, the Scottish Government published a tobacco control strategy setting out bold new actions that will work towards creating a tobacco-free generation of Scots by 2034. I hear that in the Humber there are more plans in advance of that, although I think our problem may be slightly larger. Key actions in the plan include setting the target date of 2034 for reducing smoking prevalence to 5% and eliminating it in children; a pilot of the schools-based programme ASSIST—“A Stop Smoking in Schools Trial”; and a national marketing campaign on the dangers of second-hand smoke in cars and other enclosed spaces. I echo the comments on the need for a UK-wide national campaign and media advertising.

Although the Scottish Government have long made clear their aspiration for a tobacco-free Scotland, the strategy sets the date by which we hope to realise the ambition. It is not about banning tobacco in Scotland, though if we were to discover it today we would never licence it. I remember as a child listening to the Bob Newhart radio sketches—some may remember them—and he had one about Nutty Walt and the discovery of tobacco. That was only about the crazy tobacco scene and did not even go into the ludicrous health aspects. Nor is the strategy about stigmatising those who wish to smoke. The focus is on doing all we can to encourage children and young people to choose not to smoke.

In September, the Scottish Government welcomed figures that showed that children’s exposure to second-hand smoke in the home reduced from 11% to 6% from 2014 to 2015, which I think sets us in the right direction. Health inequality is a key theme running through the Scottish National Party’s tobacco control strategy, with explicit recognition that current smoking patterns have a hugely disproportionate impact on Scotland’s most deprived communities. That is no different from anywhere else in the UK or, as we have heard from so many speakers, throughout the world.

Scotland has a proud record on tobacco control. We believe the UK Government need to get their finger out and commit to publishing their promised new tobacco control plan for England. I am a great believer that we can learn from each other and pinch good practice whenever we see it, so a good tobacco control plan for England may well help us in Scotland by exposing a few other ideas and strategies that perhaps we have not considered or pushed as firmly.

[Ms Karen Buck in the Chair]

Alex Cunningham: The hon. Gentleman has outlined a great catalogue of activities north of the border, in my own homeland. I appreciate that, but what new, big ideas are there north of the border that could contribute to the plan of colleagues in England?

Martyn Day: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question. I have mentioned some of the key points that we are targeting, and stopping children smoking is the key aspect. The title of the strategy we are working on is “Creating a Tobacco-Free Generation”. That is important. The point has been alluded to by other speakers that stopping people smoking is more important than reducing it, although reduction is important for those who smoke because of the impact on deaths and on the health service.

We encourage the UK Government not to keep the House waiting but to fulfil their promise to publish their new plan. If they are stuck for ideas, they are welcome to look at Scotland’s 2013 plan.
Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Ms Buck. I start by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) and to the Backbench Business Committee for allowing him and others to secure this important debate. As we all know, he has done much during his time in Parliament to address the sale and use of tobacco products, not only in his own constituency, just up the road from my own, but across the country. That includes his excellent work with my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) to bring forward the ban on smoking in cars with children. I commend him for his tireless campaigning and commitment to this hugely important area of public health policy.

I thank right hon. and hon. Members who have taken part in the debate. I pay tribute in particular to the hon. Member for Toyness (Dr Wollaston), the Chair of the Health Committee, for the support and expertise she brings to the debate. Her predecessor plus one or two, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron), also has a huge wealth of expertise and knowledge across the whole health brief. In my new role, I will certainly be calling on him a fair bit—I hope that he is prepared and willing for that to happen. I also want to commend the other right hon. and hon. Members who spoke today: the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) and the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), who spoke on behalf of the SNP.

I wish to say a few words to the public health Minister. This is our second outing together and I have had this role for only four days, so I think this will be a regular thing. I am definitely looking forward to keeping a close eye on her work at the Department of Health and to debating across the Chamber. I am sure we will do that on many important issues facing our country's health. If the tireless work of my predecessor, the hon. Member for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne), is anything to go by, that will be often—surely he has his own seat in here with his name on it because he was in here so much. That is a daunting prospect.

Today we are debating the important topic of tobacco products. It is crucial that the message is put across to the Government that more can and should be done to ensure that we all lead healthier lives. The control of the sale and use of tobacco is an important public health matter not only for those individuals who use it but for all around them.

During Labour's time in office, we recognised that fact, which is why we did a lot to address smoking in society, most famously with the introduction of the ban on smoking in public places. The ban brought in a culture change in our society. When we used to walk into any indoor public space, it was the norm to be met with a cloud of stale tobacco smoke, whereas now all of us—especially children and families—can enjoy ourselves freely without having to breathe in second-hand smoke or have the overhang of smoke in the air.

The Tory-led coalition Government came into power and brought in their own tobacco control plan, and it was welcome that it achieved so much over its lifetime, including the prohibition of point-of-sale displays in shops; the introduction of standardised packaging for tobacco products; and the national ambitions on reducing smoking, which were all met. However, when the plan ceased at the end of last year, it was vital that the Government published a new plan in a timely manner to build on the work of previous Governments. Sadly, nearly a year on, the Government have failed to come forth with such a plan, despite the promise and a commitment to do so last December.

Last month, the Health Minister in the House of Lords failed to commit to a final date for publication. We were expecting to have sight of that plan over the summer; we are now hopeful that we will see it during the Indian summer. Changes in Government meant the plan was put on hold. The delay is not too dissimilar in some ways to the constant delay to the childhood obesity plan—although at least that was rushed out over the summer.

A change in ministerial personnel should not be an excuse for delaying such an important intervention in the health of our society, especially when the new Prime Minister stood on the steps of No. 10 Downing Street in the summer and committed her Government to “fighting against the burning injustice that, if you're born poor, you will die on average 9 years earlier than others.” We were led to assume that was going to be the driving force of the Prime Minister's Government, and I hope it is, but the rhetoric has not yet translated into reality when it comes to this serious public health issue facing our country.

The Government have faced a vocal chorus from charities and organisations, including the British Medical Association, Action on Smoking and Health and the British Lung Foundation, which have all called on the Government to get their act together and publish the new plan. In that regard I also commend the work of Fresh, which my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North mentioned, which does such sterling work in the region with the highest smoking rates and some of the worst health outcomes.

The Minister and her officials at the Department of Health are being told loud and clear to get on with the job at hand and to answer the crucial question that has come out of today's debate: what is the delay? I hope she will shed some light on that important question in her response and—finally—tell us when we can expect the new tobacco control plan.

I want to set the scene on why it is so important we have a new plan, on top of what has already been said today, by looking at the facts and figures on smoking, including the variation of smoking habits among certain groups of society—especially children, young people and pregnant women. The smoking rate in England is 19%, but that varies from region to region. It is highest in the north-east, where it reaches 19.9%, and lowest, at 16.6%, in the south-east. Those are regional figures. When looking at the figures borough by borough, my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) and the right hon. Member for Rother Valley mentioned, which does such sterling work in the region with the highest smoking rates and some of the worst health outcomes.

Looking at smokers based on their socioeconomic status, it is clear that the less well-off in society are more likely to smoke. I am not going to go into all of the reasons for that. We just have to accept that it is where
we are—but what can we do about it? Smoking rates among those in the professional and managerial socioeconomic group are less than half the rate of those in routine and manual socioeconomic groups, at 12% and 28% respectively. When the net income of a family and their smoking expenditure are both taken into consideration across England, 1.4 million, or 27%, of the households with a smoker fall below the poverty line. If those costs were returned to the families, it is estimated that approximately 769,900 adults and 324,550 dependent children would be lifted out of poverty.

That is a striking statistic, especially given the study published only a few weeks ago that showed that 250,000 children will be pushed into poverty during the lifetime of this Parliament due to the Government’s policies. Getting it right on smoking could totally negate that impact, so it is definitely something worth looking at. The stats show we must do more to address the cycle of health inequality, which spans generations and continues the awful situation in which there are huge life expectancy gaps between the rich and poor, as we have clearly heard today. If the Government want to change that, one way would be to step up and continue the work of reducing smoking in society.

If those figures do not spur the Minister on to bring forward the new tobacco control plan, hopefully looking at the issue of smoking among our children and young people will. It is welcome that smoking among children and young people fell to an all-time low of 6% under the last tobacco control plan, as we have heard, but it remains an issue when two thirds of adult smokers report taking up the habit before the age of 18, with 80% saying it was before 20. That is compounded when children who live with parents or siblings who smoke are three times more likely to take up the habit than children from non-smoking households. It is also estimated that 23,000 young people in England and Wales start smoking by the age of 15 due to exposure to smoking in the home.

Kevin Barron: My hon. Friend uses the statistics very well. Do they not defeat the myth that smoking is an adult habit?

Mrs Hodgson: They certainly do. The situation on children smoking is quite stark. The earlier children start smoking, the more serious the consequences are for their health. Children who take up smoking are two to six times more susceptible to coughs and increased phlegm, wheeziness and shortness of breath than those who do not smoke. It can also impact their lung growth, which can impair lung function and increase the risk of chronic obstructive pulmonary disease in later life. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North, 25,000 people a year die from COPD. Surely we do not want any child in this country to die in that way. The prevalence of these conditions among smokers shows it is paramount that we seriously tackle smoking among our children and young people. We do not want to see the children of today being the COPD sufferers of the future, as well as having those other conditions.

Alex Cunningham: I am really pleased my hon. Friend is framing the issue specifically around children. My wife, Evaline, worked as a school nurse and used to hold classes talking to young people about this. She would put forward the economic argument—“If you smoke so many cigarettes over so many days over so many months it costs £2,000, which could buy you a summer holiday.” She was then told, “No, Miss, you’ve got it wrong; it is only £3.20 a packet from Mrs Bloggs down the road.” Do we not also need to ensure we tackle illicit tobacco and ensure children understand the dangers of that as well?

Mrs Hodgson: My hon. Friend raises a very good point. The danger and quality of illicit tobacco can often be far worse for health than just long-term smoking. The substances used in those cigarettes can be life threatening.

I will move on to the dangers of smoking during pregnancy, which was raised by the hon. Member for Totnes. While we know the harms of living in a household with a smoker, for some that harm starts before birth as 10.6% of women are smokers at the time of delivery. That equates to 67,000 infants born to smoking mothers each year, while up to 5,000 miscarriages, 300 perinatal deaths and around 2,200 premature births each year have been attributed to smoking during pregnancy.

Smoking during pregnancy has been identified as the No. 1 risk factor for babies to die unexpectedly. According to research by the British Medical Association, if parents stop smoking, that could reduce the number of sudden infant deaths by 30%. Those are shocking figures that show the heartache and pain a mother and the family around her will go through from the horrific events of losing a baby through, for example, miscarriage, stillbirth or sudden infant death. That is especially pertinent this week as it is baby loss awareness week, which I know some of us are wearing little pins to commemorate. There is a debate currently going on in the main Chamber—there was; it has just finished—in which many colleagues gave heartbreaking accounts of their personal experiences or those of their constituents who have suffered the loss of a baby. I was able to intervene and give a personal account of my own experience.

Baby loss due to smoking is preventable if Government action is taken as soon as possible. Important work has been implemented on smoking during pregnancy that has seen the number of pregnant women smoking fall to its lowest-ever levels, but I welcome the calls from the Smoking in Pregnancy Challenge Group to see a commitment from the Minister today to work to reduce the percentage of women smoking during pregnancy to 6% or lower by 2020. It may be an aspirational figure, but it can be achieved as long as a comprehensive plan is put in place to control the use and sale of tobacco.

Regional variations, including those I mentioned earlier, must be addressed; other colleagues have mentioned them, too. We are seeing 16% of women in the north-east and Cumbria smoking at the point of delivery, compared with only 4.9% in London. This stark figure shows that more regional action and support must be offered by the Department of Health to ensure that regional inequalities are addressed. The regional variations and the other variations mentioned show that the slashing of the public health grants is a false economy when it comes to seriously driving forward the agenda on public health, especially in relation to smoking.

In last year’s autumn statement, the then Chancellor announced further cuts in the public health grant, which amounted to an average real-terms cut of 3.9% each
year to 2020-21, and translates to a further cash reduction of 9.6% in addition to the £200 million worth of cuts announced in the 2015 Budget. As we know, specialist support and stop smoking services help to get people off cigarettes and to lead a far healthier lifestyle. However, cuts to public health funding have meant that it has proven far more difficult for local authorities to provide that much-needed specialist support.

In a survey of local tobacco control leads conducted by Action on Smoking and Health and commissioned by Cancer Research UK, a total of 40% of local stop smoking services were being reconfigured or decommissioned in 2014-15. In Manchester, we have seen a complete decommissioning of stop smoking services. This is even more concerning when the initial results of the 2015-16 survey show that the rate of decommissioning and reconfiguring is increasing. Therefore, I hope that the Minister will be able to commit to ensuring that we have a substantial source of funding for specialist services that help to support in particular those in lower social economic groups as well as pregnant women to quit smoking. We must end the intergenerational cycle of health inequality that I have spoken about.

It is important that we have a plan and that we have it now—a plan that continues the work of previous Governments to reduce smoking in our society. We have seen inroads into creating a healthier society, but we all recognise we have a long way to go, as the facts and figures show. The Government’s delayed plan must be published now, and it must have measures in place that will address the many variations, from geographical variation to deprivation and socioeconomic background variation.

We must see further work to address the take-up of smoking by children and young people if we are to ever achieve our goal of the next generation being healthier than the last. We need to address smoking among young people head on. Achieving a smoke-free society is within our reach, but what we do not need is further delay and hesitation by the Government; what we need is bold action.

I hope that the Minister can give us that bold action today and that she does so by finally giving us the date when the new tobacco control plan will be published. The longer we wait, the more children will take up smoking, the more people will get ill and, sadly, the more people will die. The time for waiting is over. We now need bold action.

3.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Nicola Blackwood): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. I congratulate the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham), my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Mrs Drummond) and the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) on securing the debate, and the Backbench Business Committee on allowing it. The importance of the debate is shown by the fact that we have the Chair and former Chair of the Health Committee and a former Health Minister present, as well as our newly appointed shadow Minister, whom I welcome here today; there was not much chance to do so in Health Question Time.

As hon. Members have made clear, despite the continuing decline in prevalence, smoking remains the largest single cause of preventable and premature death in this country, with approximately 17% of deaths annually caused by smoking. I want to be clear from the outset that the Government remain committed to reducing the number of people who smoke by stopping them before they start. We have a clear track record in reducing the harms caused by tobacco, which has already been mentioned.

We have made good progress through a comprehensive package of measures, many of which were brought about by my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Battersea (Jane Ellison), with a lot of support from the all-party group on smoking and health; I thank its many members who are here today. We have introduced standardised packaging and the ban on displaying tobacco in small shops. We have maintained a high duty rate on cigarettes and hand-rolled tobacco, and we have ended smoking in cars with children in them. Such measures have played a part in ensuring that the public are protected from the harms of tobacco. We now see that 80% of people support the smoke-free places legislation, which shows a change in culture and attitude.

We have also continued to support people to quit smoking, with Public Health England running media campaigns such as Stoptober. As the Minister responsible for public health and innovation, I am pleased to see the innovative use of digital tools such as the Stoptober app and social media messaging, which have allowed campaigns to reach out to groups in which smoking rates remain high and target them more effectively. That approach has proved extremely successful and was responsible for 130,000 people successfully quitting for 28 days in Stoptober in 2015.

I have heard the concerns about the lack of use of mass media, and I will look at the evaluation of Stoptober and see whether there has been any impact. That strategy has been used so that we can have a more focused targeting of high prevalence areas and groups by using the most efficient social media channels, but we will examine the evidence to see how effective that has been. As today is so close to the halfway mark for those attempting to quit during the campaign, I take this opportunity to wish them all the best in reaching 28 days smoke-free. I want to tell them not to give up.

As the former Chair of the Health Committee, the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Kevin Barron), said, it is notable that one of the most significant disruptions to smoking in recent years has had nothing to do with Government intervention. We have seen considerable take-up of e-cigarettes in the UK, and we know that almost half of the 2.8 million current users are no longer smoking tobacco. We need to continue to embrace developments that have the potential to reduce the burden of disease caused by tobacco use. However, we need to recognise that the use of such products is not risk-free. We need a regulatory framework that minimises risks to users and targets the promotion of products at existing smokers and not at children. I have heard the comments made today about e-cigarettes.

Kevin Barron: Will e-cigarettes, or vaping, be in the new tobacco strategy?

Nicola Blackwood: I am looking closely at PHE’s expert independent review. I have asked officials to examine that closely, and they are updating the review
of the evidence each year. I do not have a date for this year—I know the right hon. Gentleman asked for it—but I will write to him when I find out exactly when that will come forward.

Our approach has been comprehensive and has seen smoking prevalence fall in all age groups for both men and women. As various Members have said, adult smoking prevalence in England is now just under 17%, the lowest rate since records began, and we should take a moment to be proud of that. However, as others have said, we cannot be complacent. Smoking continues to be one of the largest causes of social and health inequalities in this country. It accounts for approximately half of the difference in life expectancy whereby, as the Prime Minister said, those on the lowest incomes die an average of nine years earlier than others. The Chair of the Health Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), said it so well: it has an even greater impact on healthy life expectancy, which we also need to focus on.

At national level, smoking prevalence is declining year on year. There remain significant regional and demographic variations—an issue raised by the hon. Member for Stockton North, the shadow Minister and others—with the prevalence in some population groups, such as those with mental health conditions, at more than twice the national average. That point was particularly raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and the former Health Minister, the right hon. Member for North Norfolk. I shall certainly look at the report that was mentioned, “The Stolen Years”.

Regional variation means that rates of smoking during pregnancy can range from anywhere between 2% in some areas to 27% in others. That is another issue that we must focus on. Given the wide variation in smoking rates across the UK, it remains crucial that local councils have the flexibility to consider how best to respond to the unique needs of their local population and tackle groups in which prevalence remains high.

Alex Cunningham: The Minister talked about local authorities having flexibility. Will she support ring-fenced funding in this area, which we discussed earlier?

Nicola Blackwood: Ring-fencing is a highly political question, but I recognise that some difficult decisions have been made right across Government to reduce the deficit and ensure sustainability. Councils have been given £16 billion of public health funding across this Parliament, on top of further NHS prevention funding. The big question is whether that is being targeted at the right public health priorities.

We have been looking at that issue closely in my office. Local PHE centres are working with local commissioners to try to ensure that evidence-based service provision remains a priority. Nationally, PHE has been putting together a range of tools to support local commissioning decisions and has convened a round-table of experts to review the situation and propose a range of actions. However, I recognise that ensuring that the right services are prioritised will require more than just providing data about cost-effectiveness and smoking prevalence. The sustainability and transformation plans are supposed to be part of the answer.

Norman Lamb: On the adequacy of public health budgets, does the Minister think it is rational in any way to increase in real terms the budget for the NHS while reducing in real terms the budget for public health?

Nicola Blackwood: Prevention is a core part of the NHS five-year forward view and should be embedded in NHS funding, public health funding and social care funding, as the right hon. Gentleman has stated. We are looking for the STPs to show a joined-up plan for how prevention, acute delivery services and social care will work together. PHE can and does advise and support local councils to tailor their services effectively, but we need to see how we can improve that. The local tobacco control profiles are one way in which we are doing that, but we must ensure that we see some of that work implemented.

At national level, to help drive a reduction in variation, the Government are committed to publishing the new tobacco control plan that all Members have mentioned, which has tackling inequalities at its heart. The plan will build on our success so far and will include renewed national ambitions. We have to maintain the proactive, comprehensive and non-partisan approach we have seen so far. The UK is recognised as a world leader in tobacco control strategy, and we intend to maintain that. However, I am afraid that on this occasion I will not be able to match my predecessor by announcing the date of publication. [HON. MEMBERS: “Oh!”] I know; I feel inadequate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East is right in identifying my desire to ensure that the plan is evidence-led. It is reasonable for a new Government to want to check that the plan offers the best possible strategy, based on evidence. On something as important as a tobacco control plan, which is a golden moment, we have to ensure that we do not publish the plan until we get it right. It has been valuable to have the opportunity to listen to and engage with this debate, so that I can hear from colleagues as expert and engaged as those present before going forward. I assure all Members that the Government see the issue as a matter of urgency and are pressing forward with the plan as quickly as possible. I will certainly take away the suggestion from the hon. Member for Stockton North about incorporating respiratory health monitoring into the NHS health check.

I would like to go through a few of the points that we have discussed before I finish. As I have highlighted, it is right to turn our focus to population groups in which smoking prevalence remains higher than elsewhere. In particular, we must turn our attention to reducing health inequalities in populations who already suffer from poorer health and social outcomes, such as those in routine or manual occupations or those who suffer from mental health conditions.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes said, improving maternity outcomes and giving children the best start in life is an important priority for this Government, and supporting pregnant women to quit smoking will be an important factor in working towards that. We all know that smoking during pregnancy increases the risk of stillbirth, as the shadow Minister said, and of problems for a child after birth. We also know that babies born to mothers who smoke are more likely to be born underdeveloped and in poor health. Tackling that was a
priority under the previous tobacco control plan, during the period of which smoking prevalence among that group fell by three percentage points, but more can be done to reduce it further and, most importantly, to tackle the variation I mentioned. We will look at that.

Alongside limiting babies’ exposure to smoke during and after pregnancy, we must continue to work to end the cycle of children taking up smoking in the first place. As the percentage of 15-year-olds who regularly smoke has fallen to 8% and continues to fall, we must press our advantage and work towards our first smokeless generation. That would be something that we could genuinely be proud of. Restricting access to tobacco remains key, and we will want to maintain the enforcement of measures mentioned today, such as age of sale laws. Evidence shows that children who have a parent who smokes are two to three times more likely to be smokers themselves. Continuing to support adults to quit is therefore vital to ending the cycle of children taking up smoking and must remain a key part of tobacco control in the future.

In order to achieve our ambitions for the population groups I have mentioned, and to reduce smoking prevalence across all populations to even lower rates, we have to continue to draw on the things that we know work. This is an area in which we have a strong evidence base, and that work will include continuing a programme of evidence-based marketing campaigns such as Stoptober and monitoring the evidence base for e-cigarettes.

Finally, the right hon. Member for North Norfolk is right to say that tobacco use is a global issue and an international priority. Our new tobacco control plan will need to reflect that. As a world leader on tobacco control, the UK will continue to work closely with others to reduce the burden that smoking places on individuals, families and economies across the globe. As he said, we are investing official development assistance funds over five years to strengthen the implementation of the WHO’s framework convention on tobacco control. The project will be delivered by the WHO, and through it, we will share the UK’s experience in tobacco control to support low and middle-income countries to put effective measures in place to stop people using tobacco. That will happen through capacity sharing. We will carefully monitor the progress of that initiative to ensure that it delivers results, using very effective evaluation measures. I am happy to have further discussions about that with the right hon. Gentleman, if he would find that helpful.

We can be proud of the progress that successive Governments have made on helping people to quit smoking, preventing them from starting in the first place and creating an environment that de-normalises smoking. With prevalence rates at an all-time low, there is no question that good work has been done, but as the issues raised in this debate clearly show, there is more work to be done. The Government are committed to doing that work as a matter of urgency. I will take away the comments made today, which are incredibly helpful to me as a new Minister, and I will ensure that as we finalise the new tobacco control plan—

Mrs Hodgson: Will the Minister give way?

Nicola Blackwood: This is literally my last sentence, but I will.

Mrs Hodgson: I am very grateful; I thought I could just catch the Minister before she finishes. Can we expect the tobacco control plan this year or next year?

Nicola Blackwood: The hon. Lady will have to wait and see.

In conclusion, the Government recognise this area as a top priority and will continue to work on it as such.

3.28 pm

Alex Cunningham: I welcome you to the Chair, Ms Buck.

I hope we have not bored people—many have passed through the Chamber this afternoon, and I am sure others are watching online—because consensus has broken out, at least on most issues. We have had an excellent debate, with the expected comprehensive contributions from colleagues across the House. I thank everyone who has taken part.

Many questions have been posed to the Minister on tobacco control and e-cigarettes, ranging from constituency-level issues all the way through to worldwide issues. I am sure she has much to reflect on. I am disappointed that she has not lived up to her predecessor’s reputation by giving us a date this afternoon. We had a bit of a laugh a few moments ago, but I am a wee bit worried that it may not happen this year. I hope she will go back to her Department and think on that.

As the Minister said, she must get the matter right, and that means focusing on the socioeconomic groups that do not have the benefits the rest of us have. There are also health inequalities to consider.

The Minister can be in no doubt that tobacco control remains very much a focus for many of us in the House and will continue to be in the forefront of our minds. I assure her, as others have, that she will have the full support of the all-party group, and of us as individual Members of Parliament, when she introduces the new plan. I just hope that will be sooner rather than later.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the House has considered the tobacco control plan.

3.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.
UK Exit from the European Union

4.30 pm

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petitions 133618, 125333, 125324, 154593, 133767 and 133540 relating to the UK’s exit from the European Union.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. These petitions have now closed and have been on the books for a few months. Some of them have been overtaken by events and by subsequent debates in the Chamber, but it is important that we continue to discuss these matters over the coming months.

Three of the six petitions are essentially about the timing of our invocation of article 50, if we invoke it at all. The Prime Minister has said in recent weeks that the Government intend to invoke article 50 by the end of March 2017. Why has she picked that date? The Department for Exiting the European Union did not exist just a few months ago, so a lot of the Department’s work has to be about building capacity. As far as I understand it, the Department has 180 staff in the UK and can call upon 120 people in Brussels for advice.

We obviously need to build a strategy through conversations and discussions with devolved Assemblies, small businesses, large plc councils, local government associations and major metropolitan bodies. There have been, and continue to be, meetings with business groups and representatives of universities, the charitable sector, farming and fishing. There are ongoing roundtable discussions with a number of cross-cutting organisations and people, too.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union and his Department have been performing sectoral and regulatory analyses and are looking at more than 50 sectors and cross-cutting regulatory issues. It is important that we invoke article 50 when, and only when, we in the UK are ready to do so. Martin Schulz, the President of the European Parliament, has said something indicative: “I consider it to be very possible that the Brits will know exactly what they want at the start of negotiations, but that Europe still won’t be able to speak with a single voice”.

It is important that we know exactly what we want when we invoke article 50 by the end of March.

I suspect that the petitioners who want us to invoke article 50 immediately signed that petition because they do not believe it will happen. The petitioners who want us never to invoke article 50 effectively buried their heads in the sand after the referendum and are trying to replay the debate we had before 23 June. Some petitioners want Parliament to vote on article 50, which is a continuing debate—we debated it in the main Chamber last week.

There is an ongoing case in the High Court. I read an interesting article in The Daily Telegraph by my hon. Friend the Member for Esher and Walton (Mr Raab), who has a significant Government legal background from before his election to this place. He surmises that the Government negotiate and sign treaties and that Parliament makes sure that we can comply with international obligations under UK law. The Government take the view—and I agree with their position—that the royal prerogative is the right way to invoke article 50, which is effectively the Government negotiating and signing treaties. Parliament will be able to scrutinise the Government’s discussions as we seek to leave the EU, and it will also have a significant say over the coming two years in shaping our exit from the EU through the great repeal Bill. Parliament will also have a significant say on shaping our future relationship with the EU, which will involve a separate negotiating process.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): It is all very well our saying what we want before article 50 is triggered, but after that point the EU will tell us what we are going to get. We will not have any negotiating power. Before we pull the trigger, would it not be better for us to have an idea of what we are likely to get and then to have a referendum on the exit package? That is very different from what people reasonably understood when they voted on 23 June.

Paul Scully: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, but I disagree with him because I do not believe that the European Union will tell us what we will get; rather, this will be part of an open negotiation. Why? Because there is not one body. There are 27 different voices within the European Union, excluding ourselves, and they will each be fighting for their patch. Each country will be fighting for its own important sectors and will have those sectors in mind when it comes to the joint negotiations. The one that is often cited is the German automotive industry, which sells 10% of its cars to the UK market. Germany will not want BMW, Audi and Volkswagen—all those major brands—to suffer as a result of the Commission in Brussels burying its head in the sand during the negotiations. Each corner and each country will fight for its own sectors, as will the UK.

Geraint Davies: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s generosity. Does he agree that it is striking that the 27 countries will decide among themselves what they will give us? We will not decide. They will have a big argument about it, as he says, but then they will say, “This is what you’re getting.” If the German car manufacturers think it is better to keep out the Japanese through tariffs and to sell more Mercedes to Spain and fewer to Britain, that is another decision. Ultimately, those 27 countries will decide collectively and then tell us what we are getting.

Paul Scully: By invoking article 50 we will effectively be working out how to separate the UK from the rest of the EU—that is, dividing up the assets and liabilities and deciding how we move forward with the institutions. Although that is intertwined, it is also slightly separated from our future relationship with the EU. Article 50 says that we have to take our future relationship into account, but there is plenty of time and we need to use the full two years to work out our future relationship.

I would not want to see our future relationship being hamstrung by waiting to invoke article 50 because we are trying to limit our negotiations on our future relationship...
[Paul Scully]

with the EU. Frankly, that is what hamstrung David Cameron in the first place. If he had asked for more and had not limited himself in his renegotiations with the EU last year, we might have been in a very different place in the lead up to the referendum. We might have voted to remain. We should not limit ourselves in our negotiations on how we move forward once we have left the EU just so we can get to the point of invoking article 50 and starting the process next March.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Gentleman mentioned devolved Assemblies, Parliaments and Governments a moment ago. Will he be clearer about the role he feels they should have? A crucial factor is that when we went into the European Communities, as they were then, we did not have devolution. A significant amount of the responsibilities have now been devolved to Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland. The people of those devolved Administrations and Governments must have a clear say on this process. What role does he think they should play?

Paul Scully: That is why my right hon. Friend made a big effort to visit Edinburgh very soon after she was elected Prime Minister: to show her intention to engage with the devolved Parliament in Scotland and with the Assemblies. Speaking to the devolved parts of the UK, and also with councils and metropolitan bodies, going right down to smaller units of government, will be integral to the discussions over the next few months. That is crucial.

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): In July, the Prime Minister mentioned that Scotland will be “involved” in the negotiations. In October, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union said that we would be “consulted”. Which one is it?

Paul Scully: We will all be involved in the negotiations, because we will all—parliamentarians, devolved bodies and business—be involved in the debates and discussions held here over the next couple of years. We need to involve the country in this important debate.

As was said during the debate on the referendum, and as I said when I was campaigning to leave, this is a 40 to 50-year decision. Frankly, that is why I, as someone who has wanted to leave the EU for 20 to 25 years, am quite happy to be patient for six months before we invoke article 50. We need to get our exit right, and then spend the two years ensuring that we get our future working and trading relationship with the EU right as well. This is an absolutely crucial period for the UK to get it right for the economy, for immigration and for control and sovereignty within this country—the three pillars that I was talking about.

We will have our chance to vote as parliamentarians on the great repeal Bill, which will come into effect the day we finally leave the EU. It will transpose EU law into domestic law. We can then choose; we will be taking control. That vote and the votes on subsequent Bills will determine how we leave the EU. That is Parliament ensuring that we are complying with international obligations under UK law.

One of the petitions mentions freedom of movement; its title is “Not to allow freedom of movement as part of any deal with the EU after Brexit”. The Prime Minister has been clear that we need to restrict freedom of movement. By doing so, we can create a system that allows us to control numbers and encourage the brightest and best, but at the moment we are limited in that ambition.

To my mind, one of our biggest pull factors for migration, especially from within the EU, is not benefits or the other things that people talk about, but the jobs that we have created over the last few years. The UK has been a success story in creating many jobs in difficult conditions. Youth unemployment is 48% in Greece, 43% in Spain and 39% in Italy. We can and should attract skilled workers and entrepreneurs from around the world. Naturally, EU citizens on our doorstep are likely to be the most numerous coming in, due to their location. I want to end that sense of entitlement and ensure that skilled workers from around the world, whether from Bangladesh, Australia, America, Canada or India, are on an equal footing with unskilled workers coming into this country from other parts of the EU.

Royston Smith (Southampton, Itchen) (Con): To expand on the pull factors, does my hon. Friend agree that they are not benefits or the obvious things that people refer to, or even what he referred to, but the English language and the national living wage created by this Conservative Government? Those are two other pull factors that we simply cannot change.

Paul Scully: My hon. Friend makes a fantastic point. He is absolutely right. That is why I believe the UK will be on a sure and steady footing when we come to negotiate with the EU. Due to the rule of law, our language and the trading history and trading relationships we have built up around the world, we are still an attractive location for businesses and inward investment.

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: The hon. Gentleman mentioned the importance of attracting skilled workers. What would he say to the skilled workers in the United Kingdom who form a huge part of our national health service and include many of our teachers, given that this Government can give them no guarantees about their continued ability to stay in this country to teach and keep us well?

Paul Scully: When one talks about huge numbers in the NHS, it is important to remember that, although they are an absolutely valued part of our health service, EU citizens make up 4% of NHS staff. Some 15% come from outside the UK, and a third of those come from within the EU.

None the less, it is important to value skilled workers and entrepreneurs. We need to attract the brightest and the best. This is effectively taking control, because it means that the UK can determine our own immigration policy. That may involve no change, or it may involve radical change, but that decision will be taken here, after full consultation with the UK public, rather than with one arm effectively tied behind our back by rules and regulations and the determination of Brussels. That does not limit our compassion or our ambition. We should ensure that we never confuse or conflate immigration of the type that I have been talking about with our responsibilities to refugees.
One of the petitions calls for designating 23 June independence day and celebrating it annually. It must have been a joke in Hollywood to premiere “Independence Day” on the day of the referendum result. Friday 24 June: I think someone in one of the movie studios had a sense of humour. However, 48% of people voted to remain. There are 27 countries considering their trading relationship with the UK, and expats around the EU considering their future. The world is looking at what we are doing.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): The hon. Gentleman just referred to trading relationships. Obviously, as part of the negotiations, individual trade agreements will need to be made with each of the other 26 European countries. Is he aware how long it takes to obtain a trade agreement and then an export certificate with countries outside the EU? We have been waiting for an agreement with China on pork exports since October or November last year, when the original temporary approval was given.

Paul Scully: The hon. Lady mentions individual trading agreements with each EU country. That is not possible. The point of being a member of the EU is that member countries cannot negotiate their own trade deals. If we leave, we will have to have a single trade deal with the remaining European Union countries. We will also then need to negotiate our own trade deals—we will be free to do so for the first time in 40-odd years—with other countries around the world, and not only the ones with which the European Union already has a trading deal but also, significantly, the many countries with which it does not. There are 168 countries outside the EU, and they get on fine.

Ms Ritchie: The point that I was trying to illustrate is that it already takes an inordinate length of time to negate trade deals with countries outside the European Union. How does that bode for the situation in terms of trade deals and trade agreements post-Brexit?

Paul Scully: If I may, I shall use what might seem like a slightly odd analogy. I have been in business for 20 years. Two years ago, I negotiated a lease for an office. It cost me £2,000 or £3,000 in solicitor’s fees, and about three months to organise. When I got my constituency office, I already had a nice lease to use as a template. It cost me exactly zero pounds and took me a week to organise. When we come to leave the EU, we can start either with a blank sheet of paper or with things that already work. I do not envisage—

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Gentleman is grossly over-simplifying the complexity of negotiating trade arrangements; I say that as somebody who has worked on them in Government. However, he mentioned his business experience; the volatility in the value of the pound is causing a great deal of uncertainty for businesses. For example, the value of the scrap used by the steel industry in my constituency is fluctuating due to the current value of the pound. Does he agree that we need to consider carefully whether the uncertainty created by the Government is giving a false impression of how the economy or different businesses are performing before we get into the detail of any fixed trade arrangements, particularly in certain sectors and with certain countries?

Paul Scully: My analogy of the lease was an extreme one. I am not expecting these things to take five minutes; nobody has ever expected organising trade deals to take five minutes. We cannot just transpose the words on one sheet of paper on to another, but my point is that we do not necessarily need to start with a blank sheet. We ought to look at a bespoke model for the UK, but that does not mean starting again from a blank sheet; we can take a little from here and a little from there, depending on what we want and on our mix of businesses, which is different from that of Switzerland, Canada, Turkey or any other of the countries often cited.

In his speech last week, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union said:

“We have Norway, which is inside the single market and outside the customs union; we have Turkey, which is inside the customs union and outside the single market; and we have Switzerland, which is not in the single market but has equivalent access to all of its productive and manufacturing services. There is a single entity, but a spectrum of outcomes, and we will be seeking to get the best of that spectrum of outcomes.”—[Official Report, 12 October 2016; Vol. 615, c. 332.]

That still leaves us building blocks that we can use to do that.

The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) spoke about uncertainty. We need to come at the issue with a sense of mutual respect, co-ordination and co-operation in order to build a national consensus, without political point scoring or people burying their head in the sand about the referendum—I am not referring to today’s debate, but I am concerned that that is happening in the court case that is going on. As the hon. Gentleman says, business does not like uncertainty; I know that from my own business experience. I do not mind risk, because business is based on it, but it is about being able to control as much of the risk as possible. We will never be able to control 100% of the risk, but the more of it we can control and the more certainty we can bring into the equation, the better the outcome will be.

Jenny Chapman (Darlington) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman’s speech is developing in quite a fascinating way. May I take him back about 30 seconds, to his point about consensus, openness and involving the public? Should that involvement and openness extend to Parliament? If so, precisely what role ought Parliament to play in the process?

Paul Scully: I said that there would be votes on the great repeal Bill and on subsequent Bills to bring into UK law many of the laws currently in place on a European level. We may scrap some of those laws, keep some, and even enhance some, but it will be down to Parliament to vote on those matters and to tackle them. That is coming up soon. We parliamentarians will continue to have these discussions about leaving the EU. The Secretary of State said just last week that he would ensure a number of debates through the usual channels when we have particular matters to consider.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): May I double-check what the hon. Gentleman said about the great repeal Bill? I think he said that, when it comes before Parliament,
some areas of European law may well be negotiated away—that when we bring things over from European legislation, some areas of them may well be dropped.

Paul Scully: The great repeal Bill will effectively domesticate all European law. There is a lot of legislation, so after that it will be up to Parliament over time to decide what to do with it. That is very much a role for Parliament.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Of all the European regulations that the great repeal Bill will incorporate into UK law, which does the hon. Gentleman most look forward to reforming or eradicating?

Paul Scully: What I really look forward to is being able to take control and make the Government accountable, so that we can look our electorate in the eye and say, “You know what? If you don’t like what we’re doing—if you don’t like the legislation we’re pushing through—we are not going to sit there and blame Brussels, or any number of presidents who sit in Brussels and Strasbourg. It is our responsibility; we are accountable to you.” That is what I most look forward to: taking control.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Paul Scully: No. I have taken a good few interventions, and I know others want to speak.

My view on Brexit is not insular—quite the opposite. I am really excited about the prospect of a bright future in which we lift our head up to the world, trade with every continent, including Europe, and grab the opportunities that follow. Let us be patient, get it right so that we can look our electorate in the eye and say, “These are the terms of your exit.”

4.56 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): I speak as a member of the Council of Europe—like your good self, Mr Wilson—and of the European Scrutiny Committee. The first thing to point out is that, although the petitions under discussion are all very important and have been signed by tens of thousands of people, they are dwarfed into insignificance by the petition signed by the 4.1 million who thought that the referendum should have had a turnout of 75% and a pass mark of 60%.

Obviously the referendum has happened and we acknowledge it, but it is important to remember that it was based on what were basically a lot of false promises. In practice, many people I have spoken to about the vote say that what they anticipated was lower costs; £350 million a week to the NHS, for example; less migration; and market access. It now transpires that in the short term we are seeing much more migration and that costs will be phenomenally higher. The Chancellor and the Government have abandoned the deficit targets, and we are going to see a colossal increase in borrowing and expenditure in the autumn statement, in anticipation of dropping revenues. As for market access, the hard Brexit approach that emerged at the Conservative party conference and that the public did not vote for—they only voted to leave the EU—has sent the pound to a 30-year low. That might be okay in the short term for some exporters, but it will generate inflation and problems.

People are increasingly realising that much of the inward investment that the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) spoke about was from businesses such as Japanese car manufacturers, which wanted to be here not only because we speak English but as a platform into the biggest marketplace in the world. But Nissan, for example, is now saying that if tariffs rise they should get compensation. If other inward investors need that, it will be a nightmare for the national accounts and for attracting businesses. The country will be borrowing more. What is more, the Prime Minister criticised the Bank of England—although she has no control over it—on quantitative easing and borrowing, which have moved up interest rates. From a business point of view, we will borrow more at a higher cost because of those pronouncements. We will have less access to a big market and less access to skills.

Like the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam, my background is in business—multinational business, as it happens; I was in charge of developing products for Colgate across Europe. Such companies will move production into the marketplace to avoid those tariffs. Businesses such as Tata Steel may be enjoying some short-term benefit from the exchange rate, but they know that 60% of their steel exports are into Europe, so in the long term obviously they will be looking to move. It is a nightmare.

Given that the reasonable expectations of people who voted for Brexit are not being borne out, it is reasonable to ask for a referendum on the actual exit package that we will get, rather than saying, “In principle, we’d like to go if we got this. Oh, it looks like we’re not going to get it, so let’s have a referendum on that.” We should do that before article 50 is triggered, because as soon as we trigger it, we have no negotiating power. The EU will then decide the terms of our exit within two years. Yes, the 27 countries will argue about what is best for them, but they will come to some consensus and say, “These are the terms of your exit.”

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam mentioned negotiating deals. As I said, he has been in business like I have. In business, someone with more power is in a better position. If the EU is negotiating with any country on behalf of Britain, it is in a much more powerful position to get the best deal than Britain negotiating individually with that country. What is more, if that country knows that we are desperate for deals because we are leaving the EU and wanting to expand, particularly if it is a very powerful country like China, it should hold back on its pork deal or whatever and say, “This is what you’re getting.” Britain will say, “We don’t like that,” and the Chinese will say, “Well, where are you going to go? You cannot go to Europe because you have shut the door behind you.”
Paul Scully: Will the hon. Gentleman comment on the fact that the simplest way of showing we were desperate for a deal would be to limit ourselves to a negotiating position that was so slim that we would effectively be saying, “We want the single market, we want to keep freedom of movement, and we want to carry on paying into the EU—we effectively want to be in the EU, in all but name”? That would be very limiting and smacks of desperation.

Geraint Davies: To be clear, I want to stay in the EU. I have a Bill on the terms of withdrawal that I hope will be given a Second Reading on Friday. It basically says that we should get the exit package—or at least a good understanding of what it will look like with regard to the balance between migration and tariffs and all the other costs—and, if the British public think that it is a reasonable representation of what they thought they were going to get, then fine, we will go ahead on that basis, before the triggering of article 50, after which it is a one-way street and we have no power. If the British public do not think it is reasonable, the default position would be to stay in the EU because it had all been a dreadful mistake. Frankly, it has been a dreadful mistake.

Mr Philip Hollobone (Kettering) (Con): I am listening to the hon. Gentleman with great interest. Frankly, I think he is in the wrong job. I am sure he is an excellent Member of Parliament, but he has not understood the message of the 17.4 million people who voted to leave. He would be better suited to a job on the business section of the “Today” programme, because the first five minutes of his speech have been unremitting doom and gloom. Why would the EU want to negotiate with us? One reason is that they sell us £70 billion a year more than we sell to them, so it is in their interest to have a good deal with the United Kingdom post Brexit.

Geraint Davies: On the hon. Gentleman’s second point, rather than his first comment, there are only two countries in the EU that sell more to us than we sell to them: Holland and Germany. The other 25 nations have an interest in tariffs, because they obviously have a trade deficit. Germany might say, “We have all these Mercedes cars we’re selling,” but we know that when they block out the Japanese—who are primarily here because they want a platform for their car industry—and sell more cars to Spain, because the Japanese cannot, even they might agree with tariffs.

The simplistic proposition that was put forward by the purveyors of “It’s going to be all right; we’ll take control,” is farcical. That campaign was led by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the one and only right hon. Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson), who—a recent article has disclosed—was in favour of remaining in the EU. I was saying as much well before that article came out, because all his family were in favour and it is rational to stay in. He made a calculation because his primary objective was to become the leader of the Conservative party and Prime Minister. He was going to be up against the then Chancellor; the right hon. Member for Tatton (Mr Osborne), who was pro-remain. The majority of Conservatives—more than 60% of party members—are for Brexit, so his plan was to go on about how great it was going to be to take back control, while hoping that we would narrowly remain. He would then have become the great leader standing up to Europe within Europe. But it all failed.

From that article, it is clearly true that that is what it was about. The Foreign Secretary has claimed that the article was some sort of script for “Blackadder,” or whatever his latest claim is, but when I approached him just before the Brexit campaign, I asked him a question—which the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam was asked and did not answer—and which I used to ask cab drivers, or anybody else. I said, “Name me one law in Europe that you don’t like.” The right hon. Gentleman said, “Erm, there are four directives on bananas.” I said, “This is not some sort of joke. Can you think of anything?” Eventually, after some consternation, he said, “REACH.” Members will no doubt know that REACH—the regulation for the registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals—applies the precautionary principle to endocrine disrupting chemicals in manufactured products. I said, “What’s wrong with that?” and he said, “Oh, well, I don’t really know,” and he walked off. His heart was not in it; his heart was in becoming the leader of the Conservative party. We are in this farcical position where we are going to lose out economically because the people of Britain have been sold a false promise.

On the point made by the hon. Member for Kettering (Mr Hollobone), if someone goes to a shop and buys a phone that they are told works in a certain way, and they go home and it simply does not work in that way, they have the right to go back and say, “Hold on, I was told that this worked in a certain way but it doesn’t. I want my money back.” We need another referendum.

Royston Smith: We seem to have turned this debate into some sort of attack on the Foreign Secretary. Were we to expand on that, we could equally talk about the Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn). Because he was actually in favour of Brexit, he was so lukewarm when campaigning for remain that it caused a leadership challenge in the Labour party. We would be better moving on from the personalities and getting back to the substance laid out in manufactured products. I said, “What’s wrong with the precautionary principle to endocrine disrupting chemicals in manufactured products.” Members will no doubt know that REACH—the regulation for the registration, evaluation, authorisation and restriction of chemicals—applies the precautionary principle to endocrine disrupting chemicals in manufactured products. I said, “What’s wrong with that?” and he said, “Oh, well, I don’t really know,” and he walked off. His heart was not in it; his heart was in becoming the leader of the Conservative party. We are in this farcical position where we are going to lose out economically because the people of Britain have been sold a false promise.

Geraint Davies: It is fair to say that the Foreign Secretary is not completely responsible for a narrow victory and that, had the Labour party and its leader done a better job of explaining the fact that we have inward investment because we are a platform into a big market, and we have good rights at work because they are collectively agreed, and that all that might be lost and so on—I will not run through all the arguments—we might not have ended up where we are. Indeed, had the Prime Minister not been so complacent about staying in the EU that he decided not to give 16-year-olds the right to vote in the referendum and not to allow British people living abroad to vote, we would be in a different place. It is obviously not all the fault of the Foreign Secretary; I am simply saying that his primary objective was to become, essentially, the leader of Britain, and that as a result our destiny has changed. It is a great tragedy of Greek proportions.
Mr Hollobone: The hon. Gentleman has very honestly said that he wants us to stay in the European Union. Does he accept the result, or is the logic of his argument that he would vote against any deal in a second referendum and then seek to maintain our membership?

Geraint Davies: I am holding back my cards. It is certainly the case that I view the referendum as advisory, not mandatory. We are here as part of a representative democracy to look at things in detail on behalf of our constituents. It was an acclamation at the time, but, as the disaster is emerging, the opinion polls suggest that were people to be asked again next week, they would not want it. I am here to represent the best interests of my constituents, the majority of whom voted to remain. On a local scale, Wales will lose thousands of jobs and billions of pounds. I hope that people will be allowed another chance to take a more considered view with more information, before we go ahead and trigger article 50, after which we will have no negotiating power.

Paul Scully: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his generosity in giving way. When he talks about the referendum being advisory, does he remember that £9.4 million leaflet that went to every household? When I led the Westminster Hall debate on the petition related to that leaflet, I said that people were likely to forget all the words in it but remember the £9.4 million cost. I cannot remember the exact wording, but there was a line in there that said that the Government will accept the will of the people and will implement the result of the referendum. That was clear and unambiguous to every member of the public who received and read that leaflet.

Geraint Davies: Sadly for myself and indeed the country, I am not part of the Government. [Interruption.] There we are.

Do not misunderstand me—it was an extremely serious vote and the will of the electorate needs to be respected. However, one has to remember that the referendum vote was quite a narrowly defined vote and the suggestion is that now, if more information was available, people would act differently.

If it is increasingly obvious that the economic impact, in particular, and the other impacts will be so disastrous that they will be outside of what people expected, and if what is being offered—namely the hard Brexit—is not what people anticipated, it is reasonable that we should have another look at what will be a long-term change.

Regarding the spectrum of people voting, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam and others will know that only 15% of people over the age of 65 did not vote—85% of them did vote—whereas only a third of people aged between 18 and 24 voted. Now, people might say, “Well, that’s their fault”—I understand that point—but people of that age have more to lose, in terms of the length of time and all the rest of it.

The whole thing was sort of hurtled through and the reason we had this referendum—let us face it—was because David Cameron, the then Prime Minister, thought before the general election, “Well, I’ll offer a referendum to stop UKIP; so the Labour party won’t win”, and we have ended up in a situation with this referendum that he thought he was going to win but cackhandedly messed up. Obviously, we had this deception at the same time, and we have ended up in this position. In the light of what is happening, should we as responsible representatives just sit back and say, “Oh, what can you do?”

Stephen Doughty: I wonder if, like me, my hon. Friend has had conversations with his constituents and found that, regardless of which way they voted, they feel very much in the dark at the moment about the actual practicalities of where we are and where we will be in the future. I know that he too has a significant proportion of constituents who working in the higher education sector and who are wondering whether their research projects will be able to continue, and many who work in the aerospace industry—Airbus operates in the defence space and aerospace sectors across Europe, with multiple sites, so what is the future for that industry?—or in the steel industry. People want to know the practicalities—the pragmatic results—regardless of whether they respect the vote or otherwise. Does he feel, four months on, that he has any clearer answers about where we are to give to the constituents asking these questions?

Geraint Davies: Well, no. As I have said, I would like to think we would look again, because, as my hon. Friend has just pointed out, there is enormous uncertainty in all those industries and all those delivery systems, so the inward investors and co-operators cannot come in.

My hon. Friend mentioned higher education. In Swansea West we have seen the building of a second university campus, with hundreds of millions of pounds of European money. This institution is internationally acclaimed and networked, in particular, into research and development across Europe. Now, all of that networking and those partnerships will say, “Sorry, you can’t do that now, because you’re not going to be here”. So, after all those partnerships, we will have to do our own research on our own, rather than having this global space or platform in Europe to do it.

My hon. Friend also mentioned hospitals. Sadly, my mother has been very unwell and she is in a hospital in Portsmouth. As I left the hospital, I saw that there was a board showing six of the top surgeons in that hospital and none of them had “British names”. What that means is that some of the best people in the world have trained and are giving their services here, and the suggestion that after five years we will just ship people off because they have got the wrong name is ridiculous. We have always been an international place that attracts people who get Nobel prizes. We have seen a number of Nobel prize-winners recently saying, “It is appalling that we’re now going to pull up the drawbridge and become Fortress Britain.” As for the point about uncertainty, business and other service sectors simply do not know what will happen.

Of course, in the community of people who are EU citizens, the referendum result is a disaster, and not only because xenophobia is being spread and people are in the streets, saying, “Go home”, and all the rest of it, but because the economic fact is that the average EU citizen contributes 34% more in tax than he or she consumes in public services. If we swap those people for retired Brits in Spain, France or wherever it is—I know there are about 2.2 million of those people living abroad and we have got about 2.6 million or so people from the EU living here—we would be swapping hard-working, tax-contributing, working Polish people and all the rest of it.
for people who have retired to the sun, and who would be more of a cost on the health service and make less of a contribution. How does that make economic sense, and was it debated?

The whole thing is a nightmare and what the Government are saying to those people is, “Well, we won’t allow you to have permanent residence here until we know everybody else isn’t going to send our people back”, and when will we get that assurance? So, the point about uncertainty is at the heart of the problem. Who will invest? Who will have these academic partnerships?

A dreadful situation is emerging. I realise that some of the opponents of this view want “Independent Trump Day”, or whatever they want here, and some people still think this is going to be a great idea, and are sure “Only Fools and Horses” and all that sort of stuff is fantastic. However, the reality is that this is an issue of such immense strategic importance that Parliament should look at it again and not simply say, “Well, that’s what they said. It’ll be unfortunate if it doesn’t turn out as we hoped.”

We realise we cannot negotiate; we realise now that, if we go along to a country, we will not represent the EU; and we realise that we already trade with the rest of the world. In total, 56% of our trade is already with the rest of the world; it is not like we were not trading with the rest of the world before.

Finally, on being desperate for any deal, I am particularly concerned about and engaged with issues around the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership, and the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement, in terms of new trade arrangements that would give companies particular powers to sue Governments. As the Minister will know, tomorrow the Council of Ministers is due to agree the provisional agreement of CETA in Slovakia. What that will do is immediately invoke powers for companies to sue Governments who pass laws that will affect their profitability in the future. By way of example, there is a sugar tax coming in now, assuming that the ideas on that have not changed, and fizzy drinks manufacturers are currently suing Mexico over a similar situation. So we could be in line for all sorts of things. I know that the Minister has said to us, “We haven’t been sued before”, but that is because at the moment we are the investor in small economies. Now the gun will be given to Canada, and the American subsidiaries will work through that. The point I am really trying to make is that we will be desperate to have trading agreements and we will want to sign up to virtually anything, at any cost, in the future, once we are out of the warm home of the EU.

I hope that there is still space politically to think again, and with those words I will give other people time to speak.

5.17 pm

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): I apologise for being late, Mr Wilson; I had other parliamentary business, unfortunately.

Before I became an MP, I worked on the “Let Britain Decide” campaign. I really believed that the British public should have a vote in a referendum, so I was disappointed that in the re-negotiation process we, as a country, revealed our hand before negotiations took place. That does not make good business sense to me, or to anyone else who has been in any negotiations, even at a micro-business level. It is wrong to have a blow-by-blow account of every step of the process.

We want what is right for Britain. The public voted for this. I know that lots of work has been going on in the background, with people pulling together and looking at everything, including trade deals. It is such a big area—I am involved in the all-party group on music and we have to look at things such as copyright laws. It is massive, as we all know. A blow-by-blow account will not be useful for Britain—in my personal opinion it could harm us in the long run—although I respect why the hon. Gentleman would ask such a question.

We should pull together and start to focus on four key things, one of which is trade. I recently got back from Taiwan and even met with Health and Trade Ministers there. Their door is open already and they are keen to set up some trade deals, and other countries are falling in line. We are not just about Europe; we should be looking at trading globally and also at supporting some of the rising BRIC nations, ensuring that their economic wealth helps to lift them into being economic powerhouses too.

Trade is one thing we need to look at; the others are control over our borders, control over our laws and control over the contributions to the EU budget. Trade barriers have been becoming increasingly obsolete. The EU has become increasingly protectionist in its outlook and slow to negotiate free trade deals. We need only look at the situation with Canada and how long that took, and it is not yet fully rectified. We cannot get over the fact that immigration is a primary concern for
voters, and we must listen to them. Issues of mass migration have been ignored for too long. Having lived in Lincolnshire for a while, I can see how migration can be very good for our economy, but it should be about doing what is right for Britain, based on the skills we need and on any skill deficit we may have. Any Brexit deal will have to address a tailored immigration model that truly takes back control for Britain and is truly right for the country. Never mind looking at other models out there; it should be a model that is right for Britain.

The EU eroded the sovereignty of our Parliament and EU Commissioners face no accountability, so Brexit must bring back people’s rights to choose who is elected.

Patrick Grady: Can the hon. Lady name the first of all these hated European regulations that she would like to see repealed after the great repeal Act takes effect?

Andrea Jenkyns: I can name one. As an ex-retailer, who started at Gregg’s bakery at 16 and had a retail management career and various other business careers, I was speaking to the high street shops in my constituency. They say to us, “Why can we not have a two-tier VAT system, where VAT is cheaper on the high street and if people want to buy online they pay higher VAT, in order to help save our high streets and drive footfall into our towns?” I wrote to the Chancellor last year asking whether that could be a possibility, but we cannot do it because of EU legislation. We need control over such things, so that is one area I would like to look into.

Margaret Ferrier (Rutherglen and Hamilton West) (SNP): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Andrea Jenkyns: I am sorry but I have nearly finished, so I would like to carry on.

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Lady’s party has put VAT up to 20%.

Andrea Jenkyns: Is the hon. Gentleman trying to intervene, or can I finish talking? [Interjection.] No, I am not offering, thank you very much. [Interjection.]

Phil Wilson (in the Chair): Order.

Andrea Jenkyns: In 2015, membership of the EU required us to contribute £6.5 billion a year—almost £18 million a day. That money should be spent on our own people. I urge colleagues on both sides of the House to listen to the British public, move on and accept the results of nearly four months ago. We must pull together to ensure that we do the best for this great nation of ours and get the deal that is right for our fantastic country. We have no choice: Britain must finally come first.

5.24 pm

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I suppose that it speaks to the chaos that reigns that we are debating a number of e-petitions this afternoon. Unfortunately, as we have heard in the speeches made, which I have found interesting, entertaining and astonishing in equal measure, we are no further forward, four months on. I absolutely respect how people voted in England and Wales, and I expect the Government to respect how the people of Scotland, and indeed of Northern Ireland, voted.

Andrea Jenkyns: I cannot understand why the likes of Scotland want to be the tail that wags the dog. Yorkshire has the same population size, and we voted out, so surely Yorkshire also has a big say in this; why should it be just Scotland that does?

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: I thank the hon. Lady for that interesting intervention. As for the likes of Scotland, first, Scotland is a country and a nation in and of itself, and I ask that the hon. Lady treat it—[Interjection.]

Does she wish to make a further intervention?

Andrea Jenkyns: No.

Phil Wilson (in the Chair): Order.

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: Thank you, Mr Wilson. I ask that the hon. Lady treat my country with respect.

Patrick Grady: As I am sure my hon. Friend remembers, at no point was Yorkshire told, in an independence referendum, that if it voted to stay in the United Kingdom, it would also be voting to remain in the European Union. That is exactly what Scotland was told, and it has been denied the fulfilment of that promise.

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: I thank my hon. Friend for answering the question asked by the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns). It is worth reminding everyone that during the independence referendum, the people of Scotland were told repeatedly that if they wanted to remain members of the European Union, they needed to vote no. Regardless of whether Members like to be reminded of that, it remains a matter of fact.

In Scotland, 62% of people voted to remain in the European Union. We have heard that “Brexit means Brexit”, but we do not know what that means, and it has become a matter of international jocularity; no one knows what it means. However, let us remember that the vote was on whether to stay in the European Union or come out, and that within the leave proposition, there were various visions. If the Government were to abide by any one of those visions, it would have to be the one that was in the manifesto upon which they were elected, and that was to remain members of the single market. Likewise, my party, the Scottish National party, is entitled to rely on the manifesto upon which it was resoundingly elected in May, which says, on page 23—I am sure that Opposition Members are very familiar with the SNP manifesto—that if Scotland finds itself being taken out of the EU against its will, it is absolutely right that its people be offered the opportunity to choose a different path for themselves.

Andrea Jenkyns: Would the hon. Lady like to say why the SNP would like to pull away from the relationship with the UK and become self-governing, but wants to cede more powers to the EU? That does not make sense, from where I am sitting.
Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention, but it makes no sense, unless she is suggesting that she wishes for the UK, in coming out of the EU, to pull out of relations with it. We keep being told that relations with the EU will remain, but will be different, which makes absolutely no sense to me, though I am not surprised to hear it. It would serve the Government well if they spent a bit more time understanding what the people of Scotland are saying, understanding the relationship between Scotland and the rest of the UK, and listening to what I thought the Prime Minister said, which was that she wanted to be Prime Minister for the whole of the UK.

Paul Scully: At the SNP conference, we heard Nicola Sturgeon saying that she wanted an independence referendum, and wanted to pull away from the UK but still be part of the EU. Can the hon. Lady say why someone would want to deny Scotland a huge market in the UK, when the two have great inter-dependability, if, as speakers have said, there will be an intransigent lack of negotiation with the UK on the part of the EU?

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: I would be delighted if the hon. Gentleman afforded me the opportunity to forward to him what the First Minister actually said about the relationship in her speech. She was perfectly clear: Scotland voted a certain way, with 62% of voters in favour of remaining in the EU. I hope that the hon. Gentleman understands the mandate that the First Minister of Scotland has to implement the will of the people of Scotland. The First Minister has been clear in her statements that she wants the best deal for the whole United Kingdom, because that benefits everyone. We believe that that best deal is to remain part of the single market—and, indeed, that was a commitment in the Conservative party manifesto.

Royston Smith: Will the hon. Lady explain something? The SNP continues to campaign to stay in the EU, because the vote was 62% in favour of remaining, but when the Scottish people voted to remain part of the United Kingdom, the SNP continued to campaign for Scotland to leave the UK. The two things are inconsistent.

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: It is very important that we get the chronology and the history right on when the referendums were held. In 2014, there was a referendum on Scottish independence, and 55% voted to remain in the UK, but that UK is no longer the same entity.

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Lady mentioned the 2014 result. I spent a lot of time in Scotland arguing for Scotland to remain in the UK alongside Wales. I think we are better off together. Does she not agree that the polling today shows that if there were another referendum in Scotland, there would be the same result? We were both on the same side in the EU referendum debate, and the people who voted remain did not do that to give a mandate for Scotland to become independent. It is grossly misleading to take the argument forward in that way.

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: I do not believe that I have suggested at any point in any of my remarks that anyone is taking the referendum as a mandate for Scottish independence. Indeed, the only people who talk about Scottish independence in the Commons Chamber—I have witnessed this for myself—are the Government and the hon. Gentleman’s party. The First Minister has set up a standing council to come forward with a number of solutions to this unfortunate situation whereby the UK has accidentally found itself being required to leave the EU. If we are talking about current polling and straw polls, that does not now seem to be the wish of the majority of people in the United Kingdom.

The suggestion is that we look at the options available to us. First, let us find the best option for the UK as a whole. If that is not possible, the First Minister will of course look at the other options available to her—options that she has a mandate for in the manifesto on which she was elected. That brings me back to my point: the Government were elected on a manifesto that said that we would remain part of the single market. That is what business is saying it wants. At the Dispatch Box a few weeks ago, the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy waxed lyrical about mass-engagement and the number of businesses he had visited up and down the country. I asked whether he could name a single business that was in favour of leaving the single market. Surprisingly enough, no answer was forthcoming, but that seems to be a common state of affairs with the Government.

That leads me on to where we find ourselves. Just today, the Prime Minister was required to state that she had confidence in the Chancellor of the Exchequer, as there are again differing positions in the Government on the single market. The Prime Minister was required to change statements and rebut the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the Secretary of State for International Development and the Foreign Secretary, because they are not singing from the same hymn sheet. It is no wonder that the country is in absolute chaos and the pound is in this position; no one knows what is happening. In such times, we should look at who has a plan. Who is the woman with a plan? I have clearly laid out Scotland’s position, and I expect Members in all parts of the Chamber to accept and respect that position.

In addition, because of the manner in which that referendum campaign was fought, we have had an exponential rise in hate crime. People who have come from other places and made this country their home are feeling vulnerable. It seems perfectly feasible for Members in this debate to talk about how we should encourage people with expertise from other countries to make this country their home, while in the same breath saying that we are unable to guarantee to EU nationals who have chosen to make this country their home that they, their families and their children, who are in our schools, can continue their life here. That is a shocking state of affairs. We cannot have one set of rules for one group of people, and one set for another. We should respect the people who have chosen to make this country their home.

Our position is clear: the democratic interests of the people of Scotland must be taken into consideration. The First Minister is happy to work with the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. The Prime Minister said that Scotland would be involved. Involvement in the negotiations is key; consulting is not enough. If the Prime Minister wants to keep Scotland on board, that is very much in her hands.
Geraint Davies: I should make it clear that I am not in favour of Scottish independence. If Scotland became independent and became part of the EU, it would be trading within the EU and so would not face any tariffs. Does the hon. Lady accept that that would, sadly, provoke a lot of industry in England and Wales to simply migrate up the road to Scotland? It would be a disaster for England and Wales if Scotland were to go, and take with it all the industry, so that it could work in the EU.

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: That is why I made the point that the cards are on the table. The Prime Minister gave her word to our First Minister, in Scotland, after the vote that Scotland would be involved in the negotiations, and she should act on that. On the hon. Gentleman’s point, if the good people of England and Wales wanted to make Scotland their home, we would be absolutely delighted to welcome them, as we are a country of inclusion.

The Government are asking the people of this country to trust them with the negotiations, but it is important to note that we have conflicting points of view among Ministers within the EU. How can we ask the British public to trust a Government when they do not even trust each other? That is the position we find ourselves in. The contrary position is taken in Scotland. We made our views clear: 62% of us voted to remain in the EU. Business knows that it is a disaster for us to leave the EU and the single market. The ball is very much in the Prime Minister’s court: she should act on the manifesto on which the Conservative party were elected to government, albeit by an extremely narrow majority. It is clear that the party is nervous about the majority and what it might mean in the future.

In closing, what develops is entirely within the Government’s hands, but let us ensure that Scotland and the other devolved Parliaments are involved in the conversation, the debate and the negotiations. If the Prime Minister wants to be the Prime Minister for the whole United Kingdom, she should include the whole United Kingdom in all the arguments. In the Opposition day debate last week, the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union said, “I have been at the Dispatch Box a number of times. I am accountable.” Yes, he is, but we are still debating this issue because we have no answers. Let us be clear: the UK Government may have a mandate to leave the EU from England and Wales, but not from Scotland and Northern Ireland. Moreover, they do not have a mandate on the terms of that exit, because differing positions were offered during the referendum debate and the Government do not have a confirmed position.

5.38 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): This has been an unexpectedly exciting debate that has raised some of the long-standing issues on both sides, and the wounds of those issues will not easily be healed without some answers.

I will focus my comments on the petition that calls for an immediate repeal of the European Communities Act 1972. Colleagues might be aware that I have a private Member’s Bill before the House that would protect in UK law all of the workers’ rights that are derived from the European Union. I fear that some of the most fundamental of those rights would simply fall away were the Act repealed today, including equal rights for part-time and agency workers, the right to annual leave and parental leave and the protection of employment upon the transfer of a business or the outsourcing of services. That is not to mention all the other areas of law that have been implemented through the Act. The Prime Minister has said that the Government will not address that. Instead they will look to pass a great repeal Bill to come into force once we have left the EU; only then will the European Communities Act be repealed. But where will that leave workers’ rights?

According to the Library, the great repeal Bill will likely seek to secure all legislation passed through the European Communities Act in the same form as it currently exists—namely, in secondary legislation. This comes to the point about which I clumsily sought to intervene earlier in the speech by the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully). As Members are aware, using secondary legislation means that each law or directive can be changed through a statutory instrument. The Bill would therefore give this and any future Government the ability to amend or repeal fundamental rights without necessarily holding a debate or even a vote in the House.

The Prime Minister said at her party conference last month: “Existing workers’...rights will continue to be guaranteed in law”.

However, there appears to be disagreement in her Cabinet. The Transport Secretary told the press on the same day as the Prime Minister’s speech that the Government want to keep only some workers’ rights measures. He, along with several other Cabinet members, are on record calling for the scrapping—or in one case halving—of employment protections. Arguments within the Conservative party aside, and whatever the intentions of this particular Government, the fact is that by maintaining employment protections in secondary legislation while removing Britain from the common floor of minimum rights that the EU ensures, the great repeal Bill will leave workers’ rights hanging by a thread.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend is making a strong speech and I wholly support her efforts because I share her concerns. The matter goes beyond employment rights and into areas such as environmental protection. Whatever the Government say, the fact that secondary legislation will be used for employment protection opens the measures up to more malevolent forces to attempt to amend or weaken them. Does she agree that we should not rely on the assurances that the Government have given in public so far?

Melanie Onn: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. He has mentioned precisely the concerns that led me to introduce my Bill.

The other way in which the European Union has helped to secure and protect the rights of British workers is through the courts. A huge number of rulings from the Court of Justice of the European Union protect employees in our country. For example, the requirement for overtime and commission payments to count towards holiday pay is because of a European court ruling, as is the requirement to pay care workers a full wage for sleep-in shifts.
Geraint Davies: My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. If businesses face tariffs in the EU, they will argue that they need to get their costs down and will say to the Government, “Hold on. Why don’t we have three weeks’ paid holiday instead of four? Why don’t we reduce environmental standards? That will give us all sorts of other benefits.” They will take rights away from workers so that inward investors will face lower costs to platform into Europe, given that we face tariffs. Is there not a real risk to people across Britain from that?

Melanie Onn: We must be careful not to paint all business in that way. However, the reality is that throughout the whole discourse on the referendum, workers’ rights have been portrayed as red tape and therefore cumbersome things that people would want to do away with. Companies’ bottom line is also an issue. If they need to save money somewhere, it is likely to be in areas where they see wiggle room, as we have seen in the past, so my hon. Friend makes a valid point.

The Transport Secretary—I feel as though I am picking on him, so I apologise for that—said last month of the great repeal Bill that decisions made by the European Court of Justice on the United Kingdom will cease to apply, so that is one thing that will change. So while some workers’ rights will be made more vulnerable, others will effectively be repealed, and it will be left to judges to decide whether to maintain them. It certainly does not feel like the sovereignty of Parliament is being restored: it is merely taking control from one unelected judiciary and giving it to another unelected judiciary.

The Minister needs to clarify things today. Will the great repeal Bill transpose existing EU case law into UK law, or was the Transport Secretary accurate in his description of the Bill last month? If the Government do not plan to do that, does the Minister agree that the Prime Minister’s promise that existing workers’ rights will be protected was misleading to say the least?

If the Government were serious about protecting existing workers’ rights, they would secure them in primary legislation, not secondary legislation. That is exactly what my Workers’ Rights (Maintenance of EU Standards) Bill would do, so can the Minister say whether the Government will support my Bill when it comes before the House later in this Session?

5.44 pm

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I congratulate the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) on introducing this debate in which we have this six-pack of petitions of very different strengths and flavours, which, as other hon. Members have said, reflect the range of views, concerns, doubts, hopes and frustrations out there since the referendum vote. Other hon. Members have touched on questions raised in relation to Scotland and were kind enough to touch upon the fact that Northern Ireland also voted to remain. I want to address some of the questions raised in respect of the Northern Ireland position and the implications for the Good Friday agreement. Too often too many people here assume that the issues of Northern Ireland are taken care of with assurances of consultation with the joint First Ministers and pledges that people will do everything to avoid a hard border. There are more serious implications for the Good Friday agreement than just the possible profile of the border in future.

Margaret Ferrier: In an article penned by the Irish Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade in yesterday’s Observer, he gave an undertaking that the Irish Government will work for special arrangements that take account of Northern Ireland’s unique circumstances. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, given the delicacy of the peace process, the UK Government should take the same approach in giving a guarantee that the interests of Northern Ireland, north and south, will be treated with the utmost importance? Does he agree that the exclusion of the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland from the Cabinet Office Brexit Committee is a disappointing signal that that will not be the case in reality?

Mark Durkan: I thank the hon. Lady for raising those issues. She is right to reflect on the fact that Charlie Flanagan, the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, and the Tánaiste have reflected that they want to make sure that Northern Ireland’s very distinctive position is recognised and reflected in the future. Not only those in government, but all the parties in the Oireachtas have reflected that in the work of the Joint Committee on the Implementation of the Good Friday Agreement—a Committee that Northern Ireland MPs have the right to attend and speak at. It has set out a programme of work in relation to Brexit to look at the trade implications that might arise, and at the dangers of the incipient borderism that may emerge once we have one jurisdiction in the EU and one jurisdiction out. Once we have differential legislation coming in, we will have the tensions and difficulties of borderism. Whether customs posts are introduced or not, borderism will be an increasing problem. The problem will not only be in border areas and constituencies such as mine and that of my hon. Friend the Member for South Down (Ms Ritchie), but across the north. Indeed, it will affect the south as well.

Before I touch on those particular questions, I want to address questions that are reflected in the petitions, not least the question of the role of Parliament. It seems strange that people who led a campaign in the name of taking back control to the UK Parliament now want to bypass that Parliament as far as considering next steps are concerned. It is clear that the people who are meant to be steering us forward have no plan, map, app or satnav for where they are going. The rest of us are being told that as far as the devolved institutions are concerned, we just have to tailgate wherever London’s impulses take them next—whatever whims, prejudices and fancies emerge, so long as there is some sort of consultation, we can safely tailgate London—but if people do not know where they are going, it is not sensible to follow them blindly. People in Scotland and Northern Ireland who voted to remain have the right to say that our position should be reflected. Members of Parliament from Scotland and Northern Ireland at least should have the opportunity to record their position here and in Scotland. The Conservative party imposed a new construct of English votes for English laws in this Parliament, but perhaps the compromise should have been English votes for English exits. We should let them decide to take themselves out of the EU and
let those of us who want to remain retain membership of the single market and have access to EU measures and programmes.

People seem to forget that we had a referendum to endorse the Good Friday agreement. It was almost unique internationally, because it was a double referendum: it had to be held not just in Northern Ireland but in the south, and a majority was needed in both. It was John Hume’s great idea. It was a way of recruiting and respecting both senses and sources of legitimacy in Northern Ireland—the Unionist sense and source of legitimacy, which was bound up in the wishes of the majority of people in Northern Ireland, and the nationalist sense of source of legitimacy, which was bound up in the wishes of the majority of people in Ireland.

In that referendum, huge numbers of people overwhelmingly endorsed the Good Friday agreement. It was the high water mark of Irish national democratic expression—a form of articulated self-determination. It is part of the very delicate constitutional understandings that are at the heart of the Good Friday agreement, whereby we brought people to accept the principle of consent. Some Unionists used to resent the principle of consent because they thought it put Northern Ireland on the window ledge of the Union. Many republicans, of course, rejected the principle of consent because they said it created a Unionist veto and was partitionist. The Social Democratic and Labour party—a constitutional nationalist party that was the first nationalist party to put the principle of consent at the heart of our constitution—worked hard to consolidate the idea, and we got a span of acceptance around the principle of consent.

The principle of consent states that Northern Ireland’s future will be determined by the wishes of the majority of people in Northern Ireland, so it is confounded by the way in which Northern Ireland is being taken out of the European Union against the wishes of the majority of people there. The dual referendum is being confounded, too, because when people in the north and the south voted for the Good Friday agreement, they took Irish and UK common membership of the EU as a given.

The preamble of the agreement between the two Governments in the Good Friday agreement clearly makes significant reference to common membership of the European Union. Strand 1 of the Good Friday agreement, which deals with the institutions in Northern Ireland, refers to the European Union. Strand 2, which is about institutions for north and south—for the island as a whole—refers to the European Union. Strand 3, which is about relations throughout the islands of Britain and Northern Ireland, and takes in all the devolved Administrations plus the Ireland Administration, also refers to the European Union. So people cannot say that the European Union was not a conscious factor in people’s understanding when they voted for the Good Friday agreement.

The improvement in British-Irish relations, in the context of our common membership of the EU, was a major part of the backdrop to the Good Friday agreement. Without the experience of common membership of the EU and the improved relations in that regard, we would never have got the Anglo-Irish agreement in 1985, which was signed by Margaret Thatcher and Garret FitzGerald, and set the context for the subsequent peace process.

People need to be very careful about what they are undoing here. They need to understand the difference between a mere stud wall and a supporting wall. When people talk about blindly taking Northern Ireland out of the EU against our wishes and about removing the Human Rights Act, which was a key pillar in the support for and understanding of the Good Friday agreement, they are dangerously knocking through a supporting wall. I am not saying that there will be a collapse straight away, but if other issues create pressure later we will regret this move. That is why people need to look more fundamentally at some of these issues.

People do not seem to realise, particularly in respect of the workings of strand 2 of the Good Friday agreement, which is about north-south arrangements, that a large part of the traffic and the programme of work of the six implementation bodies that were set up under the agreement relate to EU moneys or programmes. The Special EU Programmes Body, which, as its name implies, manages the EU programmes north and south, would disappear. The work of InterTradeIreland is in large part to do with encouraging businesses north and south to engage with European challenge funds, to understand opportunities in European markets and to understand European directives. It also uses EU money to help businesses and academia to take part in research consortia and alliances. That work would be affected. The food safety body largely deals with EU health and food directives and ensures they are transposed in a consistent and compatible way, north and south. Similarly, Waterways Ireland has channelled EU funding in a lot of its work.

We could end up with Brexit meaning that the workings of strand 2 are, in effect, hollowed out, which is a matter of gross insensitivity—to nationalists in particular, but to all who bought into and supported the agreement as a balanced package, in terms of the institutions in the north, the north-south arrangements and the British-Irish east-west arrangements. It will not be good enough if strand 2 is hollowed out in a way that suits the Democratic Unionist party, the largest party in Northern Ireland currently. It never supported the agreement, it opposed it in the referendum, it voted no and it campaigned against it. It just so happens that it would suit the DUP for Brexit to hollow out that key aspect of the Good Friday agreement by default.

People may say, “Well, that can happen. It’s just a matter of luck and happenstance,” but that is not what the people of Ireland understood when they endorsed the Good Friday agreement in overwhelming numbers, and the people of southern Ireland changed the terms of the Irish constitution specifically to reflect that. We cannot turn around and say, “You’re unilaterally being taken out of the EU. We are unilaterally going to weaken strand 2 by pulling out the underpinnings and all the key bolts, because people in England voted in a UK vote.”

The Good Friday agreement made it very clear that some decisions are for the people of Ireland north and south alone, without external impediment. The way in which the Government are conducting Brexit—they are saying it is a one-size-fits-all, for all parts of the United Kingdom—is potentially going to constitute an external
impediment to the due workings and development of the Good Friday agreement in the longer term. People need to recognise that just giving assurances about trying to avoid a hard border will not be enough.

Geraint Davies: I am listening very carefully to the hon. Gentleman’s excellent speech. Is he saying, given what has happened, that the Government should undertake to ensure that all the rights that are currently enjoyed—whether rights at work or environmental rights—the economic grants and even the subsidies to counteract the tariffs that will be introduced should now be given to Northern Ireland so we can sustain what the people who signed up to the Good Friday agreement across Ireland understood to be the case?

Mark Durkan: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. Yes, essentially I believe that is what the people of Northern Ireland voted for when they voted to remain. They want to maximise our opportunities within the EU, such as our access to programmes and funding. We have had generous access to significant funding from the EU and we have taken advantage of particular programmes, not least some of the cross-border measures. When people voted to remain, I believe they were also voting to preserve the Good Friday agreement. They wanted to try to keep it intact and do the least damage to it. Of course, people who voted against the agreement in the first place had no care about that. They do not care what damage is done to it; they just feel, “Well, somebody else will have to look after it,” and maybe literally pick up the pieces.

The other issues that the hon. Gentleman touched on go back to some of the points made by the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam and others about the whole question of the great repeal Bill. Last week I described it as the great “download and save” Bill, because it will simply download and save existing EU law, but the significant question then is, who will subsequently control the delete key? Will the great repeal Bill make it clear that only Parliament may repeal or amend those key EU laws, or will powers be given to Ministers to make significant change to that legislation by regulation?

Mr Charles Walker in the Chair

That is a significant issue, because a number of Ministers would be happy to joyride around some of those laws, once they had said, “Oh, we’re behind the wheel,” and away they would go. Perhaps, as indicated last week, it would be a bit more like clowns with chainsaws or axes, as they go after particular environmental standards, employment rights, women’s rights or other things, just so they can demonstrate the powers under the great repeal Bill. I worry about what some people might do, in an excess of showing control, and the sort of joyriding that would take place.

Royston Smith: Other hon. Members have talked about what should be repealed given the choice. May I ask the hon. Gentleman about his thoughts on when we tried to repeal the unwanted, unfair and sexist VAT on women’s sanitary products? We could not do that through Parliament, but we would be able to do so if we had control in our Parliament. Is that one of the things he would be happy to repeal?

Mark Durkan: My view on that is clear, and I have been consistent. The hon. Gentleman has given the example of women’s sanitary products, but let us also remember that this Government have often cited EU restrictions against a lot of policy initiatives that many of us would want. EU obligations were quoted in favour of the unfair pension changes for women born in the 1950s, with Ministers and Government MPs insisting, “Oh, it’s because of the EU that we have had to do that, equalising in this sort of way and not adjusting.” It will be interesting to see how many of the Members who used that rationale in the past will say, “Now we are getting control, we can have a different take on the whole question of the pension changes and transitions.” Such excuses have been used in different ways and, similarly, were cited against having VAT concessions for hospitality or tourism, even though about 24 EU member states clearly have such variations in their rates.

The other question that I wanted to ask the Minister about the great repeal Bill is, as well as indicating whether any changes made to EU laws incorporated into domestic law will be under primary legislation or regulation, whether the Bill will automatically devolve powers that should go to devolved institutions, or will it have them retained for a period and subject to subsequent devolution legislation? In the particular context of Northern Ireland, some of us worry that under a so-called great repeal Bill powers would, in essence, be transferred to London, but not devolved before they have been exercised in London, perhaps to change some of the legislation or the standards on rights.

Doing that might be in the interests not only of the Government party in Westminster but, unfortunately, of the largest party in Northern Ireland, the Democratic Unionist party. A change in a law before subsequent devolution to Northern Ireland would mean that those of us who want to change it back might do so only by avoiding a veto from a political party such as the DUP. However, if under a great repeal Bill the functions and powers over legislation in the relevant areas automatically devolve to Northern Ireland, then anyone trying to remove those rights and protections, or to reduce the standards, could do so only with sufficient cross-community support and no veto from anyone else. That is a significant political difference, so again the Government need to be careful about what they are treading on and dealing with in such areas.

A final and fundamental point that I want to make about this in respect of Northern Ireland is to do with the Good Friday agreement and the particular provision at the heart of its delicate constitutional understanding. The agreement is a special political and constitutional hologram—Unionists can hold it up to a certain light and see things according to their principles, and nationalists in Ireland can hold it up to a certain light and see things according to our political ethic and outlook—but the fact is that it provides clearly for the possibility of a referendum on Northern Ireland removing itself from the United Kingdom into a united Ireland. That is provided for not only in the agreement, but in schedule 1 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998, which translated the Good Friday agreement into law.

I want the Minister to address whether those specific provisions will be part of any new UK-EU treaty. Will there be specific provision for a UK that has left the EU to still respect and recognise that the Good Friday
agreement provided for Northern Ireland to have the option of moving into a united Ireland? Such a provision needs to be included in any UK-EU treaty, if there is to be one, so that in Northern Ireland we are not hit with the kind of question that was used to vex and confuse people in the debate in Scotland, which is to say: “If you want to go into a united Ireland, you might not be able to go into the EU as well. You will be a new territory going into the EU, and therefore you will have to have new negotiations for Northern Ireland, and they could be very complicated.” People might also say, “A united Ireland will change the member state,” so even the Republic’s terms would be up for renegotiation and need a whole new negotiation.

That sort of scare was clearly used in Scotland, but it is one that we cannot allow any possibility of in future options for Northern Ireland. Some of us worked hard to get those provisions into the Good Friday agreement, and to get sufficient understanding around them. We cannot afford for those delicate understandings to be wounded or lost by the way in which the Government go about Brexit.

Some people have tried to say, “There is a precedent”—the German example is the perfect precedent—“so we don’t need anything in the new treaty.” However, the difference was, first, the weight of political interest in making that happen for Germany at the pace at which it happened and, secondly, the understanding that, because the original European Communities treaties specifically recognised the West German constitution—the basic law—which purported to apply to all of Germany, all that reunification did was to make de facto what, in recognising the basic law, was originally deemed de jure. That was the Germans’ equivalent of the old articles 2 and 3 in the Irish constitution—but the territorial claim of those articles was changed as part of the Good Friday agreement.

As diligent constitutional nationalists, we cannot afford for there to be any dirty work at the crossroads. There were understandings about the direct and straightforward premise of a referendum option for a united Ireland, and about how well it would be accommodated, and we cannot allow that to be confounded in any way by the terms of Brexit. The terms need to be specific, because we are also working in the context of different EU treaties from when German unification happened.

We also need specific provision so that no one in other EU member states will misunderstand that referendum option when it emerges in Ireland. People might say, “We, too, want the principle of regions being able to member-state hop, or to switch from one side of a border to another.” It needs to be clear that we are looking not for any wider or more general precedent for anyone else in or around the EU, but for specific recognition of the Good Friday agreement.

**Geraint Davies:** I am listening carefully, but is the hon. Gentleman putting the case that there should be a referendum now across Ireland about whether there should be a unification of Ireland, in order that the people of Northern Ireland who want to remain in the EU can do so as part of Ireland? He probably has not considered this, but will he consider extending that to Scotland—and indeed Wales, while he is at it—so they can join a unified Ireland?

Mr Charles Walker (in the Chair): Order. I would not want the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) to expand too widely on referendums about Irish reunification.

Mark Durkan: I am not advocating such a referendum in the short term. We have to deal with the challenges and issues of Brexit and reflect what people in Northern Ireland and Scotland voted for, just as other hon. Members want to emphasise what people in England and Wales voted for. I want us to do that in a way that takes care of the premises and promises that people signed up for and committed to in that great democratic compromise that was the Good Friday agreement. We want the specific provisions that I have mentioned to be in any new UK-EU treaty, and that will be a test of whether the Government properly stand by the Good Friday agreement. We need to be able to say to people that the option for a referendum is still there—that it is no lesser and will be no lesser than was intended when people committed to it in the Good Friday agreement. That is why the terms of any new UK-EU treaty have specifically to take care of that.

I am certainly not trying to say that something in Ireland or Northern Ireland should automatically be bolted on to Scotland. Scotland will clearly advocate, consider and deliberate about its own choices and issues in all these matters. I am not calling for a referendum in the short term—that would not answer a lot of the short-term issues and challenges—but I certainly want to ensure that nothing that is done now weakens that option in the longer term. If certain changes happen, we will not be able to pretend that the tyre is merely flat at the bottom. If we lose on some key points now, serious longer term damage will be done, and that will have delicate political consequences. I hope the Minister will do more than just recite the usual mantras about consulting Ministers in devolved Administrations and hard borders.

6.12 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): It is a genuine pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker, as it is on the Procedure Committee. The hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) said that we were having an unexpectedly exciting debate. She is clearly not a regular at debates in Westminster Hall, which we should really start referring to as “Brexit Minister Hall” because we are graced so frequently with the presence of the Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union, the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker). Several of us are regulars at these debates, and we are joined by other Members who make contributions. One strength of the petitions system is that we get to hear regularly about the issues that are of concern to our constituents, and as we can see from the six petitions that we are dealing with today, Brexit has been and will continue to be one of those.

I note that we still have not had the debate on the Floor of the House in Government time that we asked for, though we had a debate last week in Opposition time. There have been statements and all the rest of it, and it is clear that regular debates will continue to take place in all kinds of guises in this Chamber and on the Floor of the House. The question is when there will actually be votes, and when the House can have its say and make its voice heard.

**Mark Durkan:** [interruption]

[Mark Durkan]
Paul Scully: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there was an opportunity for a vote following the Opposition day debate last week? I made a bit of an effort to get here—from Strasbourg, ironically—to find that the Opposition had dealt away their right to a vote.

Patrick Grady: I am not privy to the usual channels, but I know that several colleagues were travelling here, and several of us were trying desperately to get away for our party conference. For some reason, people in this part of the world seem to think that the party conference season has finished before it actually has. There was a certain amount of confusion about whether there would be a vote last Wednesday afternoon, but perhaps we will have one some other time.

Three key points have arisen from the debate and the petitions that we are considering: when and how to invoke article 50 and Parliament’s role in that; the repeal of the European Communities Act 1972 and the question of a hard or soft Brexit; and the question of an independence day, which perhaps gives us an opportunity to consider in a bit more detail the role of Scotland and the other devolved nations.

On the question of when and how to invoke article 50, we were originally told that it would be triggered on 24 June 2016. That was the UK Government’s position going into the referendum, and that was abandoned by the Prime Minister without any shame whatever as he resigned that morning. We can therefore probably understand why, when the new Prime Minister says that article 50 will be invoked by the end of March 2017, several Members—and probably the public at large—might take that with just a pinch of salt. We might have to wait for the court case that was mentioned to come to an end before we know whether it is entirely possible for the Government to trigger article 50 under the royal prerogative.

The question of parliamentary approval for the article 50 process is very real. I believe in the popular sovereignty of the people of Scotland, but I well understand the frustration of Government Back-Benchers who thought they were taking back control only to find that it appears to have been handed directly to Ministers without any opportunity for the House to have its say. There seems to be a clear consensus that the broad outline of the Government’s negotiating position should be brought to the House before the article 50 process begins. We keep hearing Ministers say, “We don’t want to show our hand and give away our negotiating strategy.” Stating the objectives of a negotiation is not the same as stating the negotiation strategy. Perhaps the real reason why the Government have not set out their position is that so far they simply do not have one.

That brings us to the bigger question of what the Government’s negotiating position should look like. That is the question of a hard Brexit or a soft Brexit—or as I heard on the radio last night, a “clean” Brexit, which apparently involves withdrawal from the single market. I suppose that means there must be the option of a messy Brexit, too. We have also heard about a full English Brexit and a dog’s Brexit, so I expect that in the not-too-distant future there will be scrambled, poached, boiled and fried Brexits on offer as well. For Scotland, of course, it will be a deep-fried Brexit to go along with the Mars bars.

In any event, parliamentary debate and scrutiny is so important because the leave campaign gave us no prospectus for what Brexit would actually look like, beyond a bus with a promise that £50 million a day would be spent on the national health service. It is all too clear that the UK Government had done absolutely no preparation whatever. The only certainty and clarity in the debate about Brexit has come from the Scottish Government, whose position stands in contrast with the UK Government’s chaos and confusion. That position was outlined again by the First Minister of Scotland at the Scottish National party’s conference this weekend. There is no mandate for any part of the United Kingdom—certainly not Scotland—to be taken out of the single market. The Foreign Secretary apparently told the Foreign Affairs Committee that many people do not understand the term “single market”. That possibly includes him, given the press coverage that has been referred to during this debate. Anyone can access the single market; the key question is whether we are inside or outside—whether we are trading with the single market or within the single market. Those are two very different issues.

That is also why freedom of movement, which is the subject of one of the petitions, is so important and needs to be protected. In Scotland, our problem has been emigration, not immigration. We are clear that we want to welcome all those who can contribute to our society, and more importantly, that those who are already here are valued and welcome to stay.

The Government say that the European Communities Act will be abolished through a great repeal Bill. The First Minister of Scotland made it clear at the weekend that SNP Members of Parliament will vote against that Bill when it comes to the House. The mandate that I have from 78% of voters in Glasgow North and 62% of voters in Scotland is for Scotland to remain in the European Union. The Scottish Parliament will of course be required to give its assent to any Act passed by this Parliament that affects its powers.

The hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) raised many important questions about the impact of Brexit on the devolved powers of the different Assemblies and Parliaments across the United Kingdom. My right hon. Friend the Member for Gordon (Alex Salmond) made the point in the main Chamber last week that the principle of devolution to Scotland is that anything that is not reserved is devolved, so it stands to reason that once all the powers held by the European Union come back to the United Kingdom, they should be devolved to Scotland. The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union was not able to respond to that point in the Chamber last week, and I do not know whether his Minister is any more prepared to do so at this stage.

As has been clear from the debate, the great irony of the great repeal Act is that the first act of taking back control will give a democratic mandate for, and enshrine in UK law, all the hated regulations that the Brexiteers have campaigned against for so many years—regulations that protect our beaches, our air quality and, indeed, as the hon. Member for Great Grimsby said, all our workers’ rights. While Brexiteers might delight in the thought of eventually getting to unpick those regulations, when it came to what was actually going to happen, it was pretty thin gruel: it was various tweaks to VAT on sanitary products, some of which could probably have been done by negotiating a derogation in the first place.
The notion of a two-tier VAT system will be very interesting to manufacturers in other parts of the world who want to import their goods to the United Kingdom.

Paul Scully: On the so-called tampon tax, I heard the hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) say, from a sedentary position, “Is that it?” The point is that the then Chancellor of the Exchequer faced a near parliamentary rebellion on the issue, and then had to take it to the European Union Finance Ministers and wait six months. Then the Prime Minister had to go to the Committee of Ministers with a begging bowl, effectively—and still there was not a result on that single, small issue, which should have been so simple to resolve. That shows why it is important to invoke article 50 and take back control.

Patrick Grady: Some of that is about the political will of the UK Government. As the hon. Gentleman said, they took those actions only after coming under massive amounts of parliamentary pressure here in the House of Commons.

Melanie Onn: That was not the first time the tampon tax issue had been brought to the House’s attention. If women’s issues and rights were put at the heart of every single policy at the outset of negotiations on them with the EU, we would not have been in that position in the first place.

Patrick Grady: Absolutely. A lot of it goes back to the case we were making before 23 June. We were saying not that everything was sweetness and light and that the European Union was perfect, but that there was an opportunity to play a constructive, more reforming role. That is certainly the role we see Scotland playing, if and when it becomes an independent member of the European Union.

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: On taking back control, what we are actually talking about is taking back control and giving it to a Tory Government, who will have unfettered control over what to do. Whenever there has been an opportunity to deal with VAT, all Tory Governments have done is increase it. That does not give us much hope that if they did have control, they would reduce it.

Patrick Grady: That is a fair point. Again, we were told of all the doom, destruction, plagues and apocalyptic that would come upon us if we became independent, much of which would be a result of us coming out of the European Union, and then it turns out that it has all happened as a result of us staying in the United Kingdom. The process is very contradictory. That is why Scotland reserves the right to look forward to its own independence day, should we choose that route.

We in the Scottish National party have always understood our independence to be defined by our inter-dependence. Independence in Europe is not a contradiction; it ought to be the definition of a modern, outward-looking country that wants to play its part in building a fairer society, at home and around the world. That—I have said this several times in this Chamber and elsewhere—is the difference between Scotland’s position in the Brexit debate, and the position of counties in the rest of the United Kingdom, and in England in particular. The previous Prime Minister gave his example of Oxfordshire, and we heard the example of Yorkshire mentioned, but as far as I am aware, neither Oxfordshire or Yorkshire has recently sought independence, neither has had a referendum, and neither has an Edinburgh agreement that says that it will be a valued, respected and equal part of the United Kingdom.

Scotland retains a right in principle to choose its own future, and indeed that was the subject of my debate here on the claim of right for Scotland. Instead, Brexit Britain risks becoming insular, inward-looking and closed in on itself, putting up barriers to people and seeing barriers to trade being put up against it. That is why the Scottish Government will do everything in their power to protect Scotland’s place in Europe.

We know that in the coming weeks serious proposals will emerge to show how Scotland could stay in the single market even if the rest of the United Kingdom leaves. The First Minister’s Standing Council on Europe continues to provide expert advice and work through the options. That is why the Scottish Government and all the devolved Assemblies’ genuine involvement in the Brexit process is so important. The question about it seeming to have been downgraded from some kind of involvement to some kind of consultation has come up
Jenny Chapman: The hon. Lady did say that. I think what we need from the Government is an understanding of the opening terms of debate of their negotiation. We understand that the terms with which a negotiation is opened may well not be what parties walk away with at the end; but surely if control is being brought back to Parliament, parliamentarians need some understanding of the Government’s opening position. I do not think that is too much to ask. A White Paper, as suggested by the Secretary of State, seems to me a good idea, so that Members can debate and perhaps vote on the terms. We do not ask—just for clarity—to vote on invoking article 50; but we want to see the terms on which the Government intend to proceed.

My hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) spoke well about workers’ rights. She sees clearly that they are not red tape, and I completely agree with her. To her credit, she is introducing a Bill along those lines, and has asked the Minister to support it. I hope he might consider doing that, and perhaps he will let us know his position on the Bill.

The hon. Member for Ochil and South Perthshire (Ms Ahmed-Sheikh) talked about chaos in Government, and she is right. There are conflicting statements coming from different Ministers. At Conservative conference the position, to be polite, appeared somewhat confused, with a lot of clarification after speeches. Perhaps the reason we do not have a clear idea from the Government of the opening terms is that they have not yet decided what they will be.

Geraint Davies: Does my hon. Friend accept that the triggering of article 50 will be a once-in-a-lifetime change and we will be out? Then there will be some discussion about the terms. In the light of that, does she agree that a case can be made for delaying the triggering of article 50, so that the emerging picture that the British public will have to confront is much clearer? I think they will have an increasing appetite for a referendum on the exit package and those terms. We are just being rushed through the door only to find that the other side is full of gas and fire.

Jenny Chapman: My hon. Friend makes a good point. What matters is that we get some consideration of the opening terms before article 50. That is the point. Whether that is done through a referendum or a debate and a vote in the House, the Government can proceed in various ways. However, my hon. Friend is right that to invoke article 50 before we have had that consideration would be irresponsible. It is for the Minister now to explain how he intends to involve parliamentarians and elected representatives in the devolved Administrations.

I thought that the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) made some extremely interesting points, and not just about the border. We are all concerned about issues of customs and the border with Ireland. I know that Ministers will be keenly considering the possibility of the Republic’s becoming part of Schengen. However, as the hon. Gentleman explained, there is a host of other issues to do with the delicate—that was his word—democracy in Northern Ireland and the Republic.
That alone is worth considerable debate, and I expect that colleagues from Northern Ireland will insist on time being given to that set of issues.

I thank the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) for his helpful introduction on behalf of the Petitions Committee. He did a good job of balancing the conflicting opinions posed in the petitions, but it was an impossible task, because they are so contradictory. That brings home to me the level of interest in the issue that there is in the country, and the tricky balancing act that the Government will have to perform to satisfy those conflicting concerns. I suggest to the Minister that one way in which he might like to go about things is with a little more transparency and by being a bit more forthright in explaining what he thinks is the right position for the UK Government.

Paul Scully: As a point of clarification, the only petition that had reached the signature threshold that would normally mean it was considered for debate was the first one, about invoking article 50 immediately. However, we wanted to make sure that the views of as many as people as possible were included.

Jenny Chapman: It is to the Committee’s credit that it sought to reflect wider public views, including some that had not attracted as many signatures. However, having reflected on some of today’s contributions and some from last week’s debate, I want to be clear that Labour Members, above all else—and those of us present for the debate would have favoured a remain outcome—are democrats. The referendum result requires that we leave the European Union. Labour respects and accepts that, and so do I; no caveats.

On the issue of freedom of movement, as my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), the shadow Secretary of State, said last week, there was just one question on the ballot paper on 23 June:

“Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?”

It would be wrong for any Member here, or campaigner elsewhere, to read into the result a blank cheque for their own policy prescription on immigration. The referendum result is not a mandate to remake Britain in Nigel Farage’s image, and, as the Foreign Secretary said last week, it is not a mandate to “haul up the drawbridge”. It would be foolish for the country to turn its back on the great talents of the world who want to contribute, and the tricky balancing act that the Government will have to perform to satisfy those conflicting concerns. I suggest to the Minister that one way in which he might like to go about things is with a little more transparency and by being a bit more forthright in explaining what he thinks is the right position for the UK Government.

Jenny Chapman: It is. I am not arguing that my hon. Friend is being inconsistent. I am just suggesting that it may not be practical, given the situation in which we find ourselves, and given the timetable on which the Government seem to be embarking. Had the Prime Minister suggested that article 50 be invoked after we agreed terms, perhaps in a year or in 18 months’ time, there might have been more chance of what my hon. Friend desires. I am grateful to see him smile.

On immigration, we feel strongly that people from the EU who are here, working and contributing, should be welcome to stay. However, just as it would be wrong to read a UKIP-shaped mandate into the referendum result, it would also be wrong to deny that concern over free movement was one of the major reasons that many people voted to leave the European Union. It is clear that the status quo on free movement cannot continue, and Labour accepts the need for managed migration. Establishing rules on fair migration will need to be a central part of our Brexit negotiations, and Labour will hold the Government to account to make sure this difficult and sensitive issue is addressed with far greater decency and respect than was displayed at their Birmingham conference earlier this month.

On the timing of the triggering of article 50, a lot can be said on the lack of forethought shown by those who presented a referendum to the British people but who prepared no strategy for the eventuality of a leave vote. Similarly, a lot can be said on the standing of those who brought us to this position and then exited stage right into early retirement. We are now in a position in which the United Kingdom is readying itself to enter into an incredibly important negotiation process, the twists and turns of which will have a lasting impact for decades to come, yet we have no agreed plan for how to proceed in the national interest, to safeguard what we value most and to achieve the changes most desired by the people we are here to represent.

In their official response to the petition, the Government said:

“The British people have voted to leave the EU and their will must be respected and delivered. We should not trigger Article 50 until we have a UK approach and objectives.”

I emphasise the bit about having a “UK approach and objectives” to the Minister. He needs to explain exactly what the “UK approach and objectives” might be; he needs to tell us how he will reflect the will of the House—the whole House—in his approach and his objectives; and he needs to tell us how he intends to involve Parliament in that process.

6.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union (Mr Robin Walker): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Walker. May I also thank the hon. Member for Sedgefield (Phil Wilson) for his earlier chairmanship of this wide-ranging debate? When studying these petitions, I recognised there was a wide range of views reflected in them. My hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) did an excellent job of reflecting on those views in his introduction. As we have seen, the debate has gone even wider in some respects, touching on a number of things beyond even the six petitions we are debating.
I thank the hon. Member for Darlington (Jenny Chapman) for her kind welcome and assure her that I take the responsibilities she referred to very seriously. As someone who, like probably the majority of Members in the Chamber, campaigned on the remain side in the referendum, but who now recognises that we have to reflect on the mandate of the British people and deliver on that, I am determined to make sure we do that in a way that addresses some of the concerns that I and other Members raised during that campaign, but that delivers on what the British people have voted for.

As others have pointed out, it is a healthy development in our democracy that petitions that receive substantial support should be debated in Parliament. This is not the first petitions debate we have had; indeed, we have had some excellent debates already on issues such as the devolved Administrations and on having a second referendum. I am sorry that my hon. Friend—the hon. Member for Swansea West (Geraint Davies); he was my friend when we served together on the Welsh Affairs Committee—was not there for the debate on the second referendum, because he might have been the only speaker in that debate to support what the petition called for. There were 13 speakers, including many from Labour and the Scottish National party, who all accepted that rerunning the referendum was not the right approach. Perhaps we missed his eloquent advocacy on that occasion.

Geraint Davies: I did not speak in that debate because I was speaking on behalf of socialists from 47 countries, as a member of the Socialist Group in the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. I spoke about the monstrousty and disaster of Brexit—the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Paul Scully) was there as well—and explained the reason we might need a second referendum, if what is negotiated by the Minister and his Department does not resemble the slightest the reasonable expectations of those who voted to leave.

Mr Walker: I am grateful for that illustration of the hon. Gentleman’s views, but I think it is important that, in responding to this debate, I focus on the six petitions before us today, which were described with typical eloquence by the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) as a “six pack”, with a wide variety of flavours.

To cover the full Government response, let me first reiterate the Government’s approach to this important process. It is a process we have only one opportunity to get right, so it is right to take the correct amount of time over it. We have been consulting with a broad range of stakeholders following the referendum result, which it is right to do, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam pointed out. We are consulting with the devolved Administrations, with the overseas territories and crown dependencies, with businesses and with other interest groups to build a national consensus across the whole of the United Kingdom on our negotiating position. We will continue to involve the devolved Administrations in preparing the UK’s position.

The Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union and the rest of the ministerial team have already heard from a wide variety of sectors and stakeholders. We will be holding a series of roundtables in the coming weeks on a variety of topics, including aviation, life sciences, financial services, agriculture and fisheries and many more. Engagement will continue through a range of bilateral meetings, visits across the United Kingdom, and the Joint Ministerial Council, which engages senior figures from the devolved Administrations. That process is about building an informed and strong negotiating position for the whole UK, and I do not share the pessimism of the hon. Member for Swansea West on that position. I would gently point out, to a colleague for whom I have great respect, that the petition he spoke to, which had 4 million signatures, was not advocated or defended by any Member who spoke in that debate and does not appear to have the support of his own Front-Bench team or many Members of the House.

Three of the petitions we are discussing today concern article 50, when we will invoke it and how. Let me be clear: the British people have voted to leave the European Union, and their will must be respected and delivered on, but the process for leaving the EU and determining our future relationship is complex. I acknowledge that the largest petition we are debating—as my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam pointed out, it is the only one that would have reached the attention of the Petitions Committee on its own—calls for us to exercise article 50 with immediate effect. However, by not triggering article 50 immediately after the referendum—as the leader of the Labour party, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn), originally suggested—we have given ourselves the time to develop a UK-wide negotiating strategy and to avoid setting the clock ticking until our objectives are clear and agreed.

It is also right that the Government should not let things drag on too long. We have had pressure both internally, as we can see from the petition, and externally, from some of our counterparts on the continent, who are clear that they want us to get on with the process. As the Prime Minister made clear, we will trigger article 50 before the end of March next year. That should reassure those who, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam probably rightly said, signed the petition thinking article 50 might never be invoked that we are getting on with the process and preparing the ground to make sure we can do that in the most effective way possible.

Geraint Davies: If I could ask for some clarification about the timing, is the objective of the Minister’s Department to try to reach certain negotiating goals, which are private at the moment, before the March deadline? If they do not reach those goals, is there any flexibility to manage the deadline in order to maximise the benefits for the British people, or is it just a hard Brexit—“You get what you get; that’s tough”?  

Mr Walker: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s intervention, but as for setting out negotiating goals, he should be clear about what the Commission and Council have said about the article 50 process: that they do not want negotiations before it has started. Of course we need to prepare the strongest possible position for the UK, and we will engage where we can to make sure we set the terms for those negotiations, but it is not possible to pre-negotiate any particular deal ahead of the formal article 50 process, so I think he is perhaps setting unrealistic expectations.

Geraint Davies: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?
Mr Walker: No; I think the hon. Gentleman has had plenty of opportunity to speak already.

In terms of Parliament’s involvement—this is important; the hon. Member for Darlington rightly challenged us to make sure Parliament has an important role to play—we had an excellent debate last Wednesday, in which there was wide agreement that parliamentary scrutiny will play an important role in this process. I welcome the Opposition’s acceptance of the Government’s amendment, which made it clear that we should come forward, engage with the House and listen to the views of the House, but also ensure that we do nothing to prejudice the Government’s negotiating position—if I can paraphrase it that way. That was a sensible compromise in the debate last week.

As hon. Members will be aware, the Government’s position is that triggering article 50 is a prerogative power that can be exercised by the Government. My hon. Friend the Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns) spoke about her work in the campaign to let Britain decide, and that is certainly a campaign I recognise. Even though I ended up on the remain side of the argument, I voted early on in my career for the British people to have their say through a referendum. Trusting the people has been a key part of the Government’s policy and the right approach to take. It is notable that the European Union Referendum Bill achieved cross-party support and passed through both Houses—I think by six to one. Parliament was clear, as were the Government, that it was for the people to decide whether to remain in the European Union or to leave, which the Government’s leaflet set out clearly, as my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam pointed out.

However, Parliament will clearly have a role in ensuring we find the best way forward. The Department for Exiting the European Union will consider the detailed arrangements to provide for that. We have already enjoyed a number of excellent debates in both this Chamber and the main Chamber. While I am grateful to the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) for his suggestion that this Chamber be renamed, I think it might be early in the day for that.

Jenny Chapman: I am grateful to the Minister for his response to my query about the role of Parliament, but he is still being rather vague. He has said that his Department will come back with some more clear ideas about how Parliament will be involved. When should we expect that?

Mr Walker: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has set out that he is approaching the usual channels to ask how that can be done. We have had some queries about Government time. We would certainly like to look into that and see how it can be dealt with. I am about to come to the important role of the European Communities Act 1972 repeal Bill and the role Parliament will have to play in that. It is clear from the cross-party views expressed in last week’s debate that Parliament has an important role to play in scrutiny as we prepare for this process.

The second largest petition we are dealing with today calls for the immediate repeal of the European Communities Act 1972. The Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union have set out that we will introduce primary legislation in the next
I recognise many of the views expressed today. My hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam made it clear that we will want to continue to attract the brightest and the best. In my own Department, we have plenty to keep us occupied and to be working on. This will not be our decision in isolation. The whole range of Government, including other Departments such as the Home Office and the Treasury, will want to look at this, and we will want to come up with a system that works.

As the Prime Minister has said, there is no single silver bullet that is the answer to dealing with immigration. We have to look at the whole range of issues, from the rules we have for people coming into the country to how we deal with abuse of the system. That will be an important part of our considerations.

**Jenny Chapman:** While the Minister is on the topic of immigration, has his Secretary of State enabled him to say anything about EU nationals currently resident and working here?

**Mr Walker:** I will reiterate what the Secretary of State has said: it is absolutely his intention to secure the rights of EU nationals who are currently working here, but we must also secure the rights of British nationals working in the EU. That will be a priority as we go into the negotiations. I can reassure Members that the Government will continue to have a very important role in scrutinising this and the Government’s further policies on immigration.

Finally, I come to the idea of having a new bank holiday called independence day. There have been a number of references to the film of that name. Alas, I am afraid that the Government have no current plans to create another permanent UK bank holiday. Tempting though it might be, an independence day would face fierce competition from the likes of Saint George’s day, Trafalgar day and many more. Within this context, it is hard to commit to 23 June over its many rivals. Unfortunately, it is just too costly, in the view of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, to introduce another holiday at this stage. When that Department analysed the impact of an additional holiday for the diamond jubilee, it was found to cost employers more than £1 billion.

We had questions from two Northern Irish colleagues—the hon. Members for South Down (Ms Ritchie) and for Foyle—about the position of the UK Government with regard to the Good Friday agreement, or Belfast agreement, and subsequent agreements of that sort. That is not the subject of this debate, but I refer them to the detailed evidence that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and I gave to the House of Lords EU Select Committee last week. I assure the hon. Member for Foyle that the UK Government stand by all their commitments under the Good Friday agreement and subsequent agreements. I have been out with the Secretary of State to the Republic of Ireland, where we have had very good and useful talks on a number of matters of shared interest. I assure the hon. Gentleman that we will continue to work as closely as we can with the devolved Administrations and our friends in the Republic of Ireland.

To sum up, I reassure Members that the Government are committed to getting the best deal for Britain, and that the Department is working hard to develop our negotiating position as we prepare to commence the formal process of exiting the EU. Our instructions from the British people are clear, and we must move ahead. This debate has provided a valuable opportunity to discuss some of the issues and the process, but what is most important is that we make a success of our negotiations. I welcome the role that this debate will play in supporting that. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and Cheam said, we must create certainty for businesses and investors as we go through this process, and I am confident that we will continue to do that.

**Paul Scully:** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr. Walker. I thank and congratulate everyone who has contributed to this fantastic, wide-ranging, informative and, as was mentioned, entertaining debate. We must be optimistic and, as I said in my opening remarks, we must lift our heads and look up to the world as a whole, trading with Europe and every other continent. We must do what we can as parliamentarians to reduce the uncertainty for business and for the population as a whole.

We have heard the rhetoric, post-referendum, that leaving the EU will be a disaster, and there is an idea in some quarters that we should rerun the referendum. The rhetoric was that because the campaign was divisive, terrible and low grade, we should do it all again, but that is the wrong way to proceed. Let us make the most of it.

When I was asked during debates what my Brexit would look like, I said, “If we win the campaign, we need to include everyone in the discussion of what Brexit should look like.” Let us continue to do that, and let us work together to make this work for everyone: the 48% who wanted to remain, the component parts of the UK, the devolved Assemblies and Parliaments of all its countries, every area, every industry, and not least—we have talked about freedom of movement—people from all countries, to make sure we do not have the Faragist Britain that has been described.

I notice that I am wearing the British Bangladeshi Power and Inspiration 100 badge that I had on last night. It celebrates the achievements of Bangladeshis who have come here, integrated, had fantastic success and achieved so much in their life. There are people around the world whom we need to attract to make sure that we have the best and the brightest in the country.

**Question put and agreed to.**

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petitions 133618, 125333, 123324, 154593, 133767 and 133540 relating to the UK’s exit from the European Union.

7.1 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 18 October 2016

[Mr David Nuttall in the Chair]

Concentrix: Tax Credit Claimants

9.30 am

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the performance of Concentrix in dealing with tax credit claimants.

This is the first time that I have spoken in a debate in this Chamber that you have chaired, Mr Nuttall, and I look forward to it.

Just hours after I successfully persuaded the House of Commons Backbench Business Committee to table this debate, Concentrix’s contract was ended. I called for this debate because the company has bullied people who depend on tax credits and targeted single mothers, many of whom have had their tax credits stopped without fair notice. Concentrix is paid by results, which means that it has a financial incentive to stop payments. Its decisions are frequently made on the basis of wrong information, and people who depend on tax credits to make ends meet have been left without funds for weeks while errors have been corrected, causing hardship for them and their children.

I thought that this debate would focus on those shocking failures, and that I would use the time to share how the lives of my constituents, and the constituents of many Members here, have been made miserable by the cavalier way in which Concentrix has used the flimsiest of excuses to end tax credit claims, and by its shocking customer service, which has left claimants hanging on to telephone calls for hours without resolution. However, since then, there have been many parliamentary opportunities to highlight such stories. I am glad that the pressure from me and other MPs has led the tax authorities to end Concentrix’s contract, and by its decision to work out what Government should do. I will deal with that point later, but it is clear that part of the problem with Concentrix is that if people were notified, they often did not believe what they were told, because the Treasury insisted that Concentrix use its own branding on the letters, so people got letters from some company asking for extensive data. I would have treated that as phishing and thought, “This is someone trying to scam me.”

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this debate. She is absolutely right that we need to learn the lessons from this mess. Many of my constituents have been left in utter financial disarray by having been left for a time with no income. Does she share my belief that we need reassurances from the Minister that the Government will take every step necessary to sort out this shambles and help those who have been left in a mess?

Fiona Mactaggart: Indeed. Not only that, but the Government ought to ensure that it does not happen again. There is a risk that it could, not just in the Treasury but in other Departments. The reason why I persisted with this debate after the Treasury abandoned the contract is that I believe that this is an opportunity to learn lessons that should be spread throughout Government.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is right to point out that this is not just a failure of practice by Concentrix but a policy failure by Government. The deliberate intention of the contract was clearly to target single parents, on the basis of assumptions that they were living with a partner and not reporting it. That is an acute, intimate and sensitive issue, and it is important in such cases that practice is handled with great care. There is absolutely no evidence of such care. This is returning to the attitude that single women bringing up children must not be respectable and need to be investigated. Surely that is something that the Government need to rethink and re-learn.

Fiona Mactaggart: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It was a gendered contract, and the Government did not stop to think—or maybe they did think about it,
and thought that women in such circumstances should be blamed. All Members here will know that their constituents feel harassed, scared and pinned up as targets as a result of how things have been done. It is not acceptable in a civilised society to treat mothers in that manner, and it is mothers who have been treated badly.

Catherine McKinnell: I agree that the majority of my constituents who have been in touch are single mothers, but single fathers have also been affected. One constituent who came to me looks after two children and works 16 hours a week, and he received no money for six weeks. Ultimately, it is the children in those households who suffer. The Government must ensure that this does not happen again.

Fiona Mactaggart: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One consequence for a number of children is that they have lost their entitlement to free school meals, so they have suffered doubly as a result of what has happened to them.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con): The right hon. Lady is being extremely generous in giving way, and we are all grateful to her. I had a case in which a single mother was accused of living with a former tenant who had moved out in 2014. Does the right hon. Lady not agree that although issues must be investigated, to do so on the basis of allegation, without evidence, and to stop payment, is not really a satisfactory way for Concentrix or anyone else to operate?

Fiona Mactaggart: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. I will try to make some progress, so that he can see what I want to say about that kind of issue. Decisions have to be made on the basis of allegation, without evidence.

Catherine McKinnell: I accept that payment-by-results contracts should be voided. All Members here will know that their constituents feel harassed, scared and pinned up as targets as a result of how things have been done. It is not acceptable in a civilised society to treat mothers in that manner, and it is mothers who have been treated badly.

Fiona Mactaggart: My hon. Friend give way?

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Fiona Mactaggart: I am trying to make progress, but I will give way once more.

Ms Eagle: My right hon. Friend is being extraordinarily generous. I have had many cases in which precisely that has happened. Single mothers in Wallasey have been accused of living with a previous tenant in a house that they happened to rent at a particular time—allegations so absurd that they had not even thought of them. Their benefits have often been stopped for weeks and weeks, and they have had no access at all to funding, which has forced many of them to go to food banks. What kind of Government allows that to happen?

Fiona Mactaggart: My hon. Friend is right that we need to focus on the responsibility of the Government, because that is what we Members of Parliament can most influence. The first lesson for the Government is that payment-by-results contracts should be avoided. Concentrix staff were under pressure to perform—we are told that they were expected to open 40 to 50 new investigations a day—so they regularly proceeded on totally flimsy evidence.

I spoke to Concentrix about the source of the evidence it received, because I could not really believe that a company would proceed on the basis of such information. “Someone else once rented this flat.” “The electoral register has this person on it.” “Someone has had their post sent to this address,” and so on. The director of Concentrix told me: “HMRC provide Concentrix with the claimant cases that they believe qualify for review.”

So the source of the evidence is HMRC. He continued: “These cases are selected by HMRC based on its own internal system which flags where there may be the potential for fraud or error. There were 1,497,000 cases provided from the Authority based on their initial assessment of risk or error and fraud.”

Concentrix subsequently runs a further series of checks to substantiate the potential risk of fraud and error and to refine the list of cases that are then checked. In the latest campaign, Concentrix deselected 80% of the cases originally provided to us by HMRC. This means we contacted 324,000 and the remaining 1,173,000 were not worked by Concentrix.”

According to him, HMRC even pressed Concentrix to investigate cases in which it could not name the alleged co-resident.

We have been blaming Concentrix for using flimsy evidence when I think that the source of that flimsy evidence is actually HMRC. My first question to the Minister is: where is the so-called evidence sourced from? Is it the Post Office, credit agencies or out-of-date electoral registers? Is it true that the Treasury pressed Concentrix to pursue cases with so little data that the alleged co-resident’s name was not even known? When tax credit claimants were written to about the investigation of their case, the alleged co-resident was not named in that letter. Many of my constituents have said, “How can I prove a negative?” Of course, if they had got through on the telephone, they would have been told the alleged co-resident’s name, but getting through on the telephone was not straightforward, as we all know.

I remind the Minister that section 16 of the Tax Credits Act 2002 gives the power to amend or terminate an award where there are reasonable grounds for believing that an award is wrong or that there is no entitlement. It also gives the power to request information or evidence where there are grounds for believing that the award might be wrong. That law is clear. It was confirmed in an Upper Tribunal judgment by Judge Wikeley that the burden of proof for stopping a tax credit award lies with HMRC, but that was reversed in these cases: the authorities proceeded to close claims without reasonable grounds that they could evidence. They demanded excessive evidence from applicants who sought to disprove allegations that they had claimed the wrong amount for childcare or were living with an unnamed partner.

Angela Crawley (Lanark and Hamilton East) (SNP): I raised the important question of Concentrix back in February. One of my vulnerable constituents, a single mother of three, was put on trial and lost her tax credits for six weeks over Christmas, only to be informed that she had no case to answer. I ask the right hon. Lady to join me not only in condemning the practices of Concentrix, which she is doing more than capably, but in calling on the Government to renounce this terrible, abhorrent practice entirely.
Fiona Mactaggart: The point is that if we do not manage to get answers from the Minister, we will end this contract but will be walking into the risk of future contracts making the same kind of mistakes. It is targeting single mums in a way most of us find completely unacceptable, and breaching the law that provides the power to end benefits and so on. This situation really is not tolerable, and it is up to us to ensure that it never happens again in any aspect of Government administration.

Hywel Williams (Arfon) (PC): I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for raising this important issue. I, too, have constituency cases with which I could regale this Chamber. Does she agree that there is a fundamental danger in a model that has a private organisation, which is accountable to its owners and has a duty to make profits for them, providing a public service, where the accountability must be to the public and the first duty must be to provide the public with a full and proper service?

Fiona Mactaggart: The hon. Gentleman is right. Civil servants are trained to conform with the law. How can Ministers ensure, in this contract or in any future contracts, that there is not a parallel reinterpretation of the law by a private company? When the Minister was informed about the Wikeley judgment, as I hope he was, what did he do to ensure that all future decisions would conform to the law? Civil servants are generally trained in a culture where the law is the guide to how they work; I am concerned that Concentrix staff were not operating within such a culture. There is a real risk of letting out similar contracts in future that do not operate within such a culture.

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Does the right hon. Lady agree that the problem is not just with this contract but with all results-based contracts in which there is a private company? When the Minister was informed of the Wikeley judgment, as I hope he was, what did he do to ensure that all future decisions would conform to the law? Civil servants are generally trained in a culture where the law is the guide to how they work; I am concerned that Concentrix staff were not operating within such a culture. There is a real risk of letting out similar contracts in future that do not operate within such a culture.

Kate Green: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Government should reconsider the situation wherein, in the face of error by Concentrix, my constituents were asked to apply for a mandatory reconsideration of the decision? That is disgraceful. The fault was not theirs.

Fiona Mactaggart: Indeed, and if we look at the figures for mandatory reconsideration we can see that it is overwhelmingly decided that our constituents were in the right and the decision makers in the wrong.

It is striking that the process was also expensive for those who complied. As my hon. Friend for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) pointed out, sending precious documents by registered post costs money, as do printing inks. People also have to pay fees to have documents reissued. Yet in every case HMRC had initially decided that the application was justified. We are not talking about initial applications for tax credits; we are talking about the decision makers in the wrong.

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Fiona Mactaggart: The problem is that the Minister and his civil servants cannot imagine what it is like for someone to have to choose between feeding their son or daughter and posting an important letter that will get next month’s money in. They cannot imagine a parent having so little money that that is the choice they face. When people’s tax credits were stopped, they were eventually restored. Although they can get additional bank charges and so on paid back—I have managed that on behalf of constituents—they often cannot redeem their credit history, which makes the rest of their life more expensive, so there are serious long-term consequences.

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Catherine McKinnell: My right hon. Friend is making a vital point. Several of my constituents were asked by HMRC to prove a negative—something that was not, in fact, the case—and had no way of doing so. Some of the people they were accused of living with were not alive.

Fiona Mactaggart: Indeed. There is an important principle in the UK’s administrative law that public authorities act on the basis of evidence and law, and that if they dispute someone’s claim, they should have a
good reason. The HMRC charter says that people have a right to be treated as honest. Well, the lone parents who were targeted did not feel that they had that right. Nearly a third of claimants applied for a mandatory reassessment, and they were overwhelmingly successful. Will the Minister guarantee that in future the Government will put acting legally before getting money out of citizens who do not have any? That is the question at the heart of this debate: illegal action has screwed money —excuse my language—out of citizens and damaged their ability to do their main job, which is to look after their families.

HMRC implies that the reason for dropping the contract is a sudden decline in the level of customer service, in particular the backlog of 200,000 incomplete cases and the terrible performance of Concentrix's telephone service. Concentrix responded by saying that the case numbers were far above predicted rates. In August this year, they were nearly five times the forecast rates, which were developed by HMRC. One contributor to the backlog was HMRC's automatically terminating 45,000 cases—guess when? In the week beginning 8 August. 

Where do mums and dads go in that week? They go on holiday, because it is the only time they can take their children on holiday, because otherwise they are at school. The Government have form when it comes to sending out such letters and starting consultations at the beginning of August. If the Minister can say that one of the things he is going to do is ensure that this nastiness in August will end, I think we would all be pleased to hear it.

Why were the predictions of the number of cases so brutally wrong? Why was the letter sent out on 8 August to terminate all those cases on the grounds that they had not fulfilled their information returns? In management terms, it would be more sensible to spread such a policy across the year, so that when someone does not respond to an information return they get a notice at the time. I do not believe that all the cases were started in August. I do not believe that thousands and thousands of people made their first tax credit application in the week beginning 8 August, yet so many of their cases were terminated in that week, causing extreme chaos in a situation that was already brutally chaotic.

It seems to me that the discovery of a service failure just after I sought this debate and just after the Department was called before the Work and Pensions Committee does not bear looking at. A cursory look at Mumsnet web chats, at the Child Poverty Action Group's advice logs or at all the letters that the Minister and civil servants have received from MPs would have made it clear that the company's performance has been unacceptable for a long time. Will the Minister ensure that any new contracts with private companies will permit a swift end if performance is substandard and ensure that the Government get information about the standards that are achieved in a timely fashion?

The current contract states that if Concentrix delivers less than 97% accuracy, its commission will be reduced, but I have discovered that in this case accuracy does not mean making the right payments to the right people; it means jumping through the hoops devised by HMRC. Let us have a real definition of accuracy, which is that the right payments should go to the right people and should not go to the wrong people. We all accept that people should not be paid tax credits wrongly, but accuracy must be judged on the real results, not on some process that is extremely burdensome.

I am concerned about the fact that, as my hon. Friends have said, the burden has particularly hit women and mums. What equality impact assessment was done at the start of the contract? We know that David Cameron called such assessments “bureaucratic nonsense”, but it seems to me that this issue is crying out for one, because someone should have thought about the fact that mums would be targeted. Of course, some dads were drawn into the net, and I am not denigrating their experience in any way, but it is not acceptable for Government policy to lay a particular burden on mothers in such circumstances.

Angela Crawley: Does the right hon. Lady agree that the UK Government have prioritised austerity measures? More than 80% of women have been adversely affected by this austerity-driven Government's welfare reforms and cuts.

Fiona Mactaggart: Not only are more women affected than men, but they are affected by more costs than men. Four fifths of the savings that the Government have made through their so-called austerity programme have been contributed by women. One thing for which I was really proud of the previous Labour Government was that they increased the amount of resource that went into women's purses compared with men's wallets. Through measures such as child tax credits, they dealt with maternal poverty pretty effectively. The current Government are doing their jolly best to reverse that progress.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): My right hon. Friend is making an incredibly powerful speech. However, this is not just about mums, important as they are; it is about the impact on their children. My constituent Sinead is a single parent. She went from receiving £122 child tax credit to absolute zero. She is paying off a crisis loan and that is impacting on her relationship and her ability to be a great parent to her five-month-old child. There is also Caroline, whose two children are in nursery. She is thinking of quitting her job because she cannot now pay the nursery fees. This issue is having an impact on children as well as mothers.

Fiona Mactaggart: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Indeed, for most of the victims of this situation, there has also been a significant effect on their self-confidence and on their reputation. Some get these letters at very stressful times in their lives—following a difficult divorce, while they are trying hard to separate themselves from a violent partner or after childbirth. The behaviour of Concentrix just added to their stress.

Christina Rees: My right hon. Friend has been very generous in giving way. She talked about the burden of proof. One woman claimant in my Neath constituency came in to see me because her payments had been stopped, as she had not replied to a letter that she had not received and there were no follow-up letters. Where does the burden of proof lie there?

Fiona Mactaggart: The law is clear that the burden of proof lies with the Government and they need to have a proper reason to believe these things. As we know,
however, many of the reasons why investigations were initiated were not what any court would describe as proper. That is a fundamental problem.

The Government announcement of the termination of the contract sought to reassure “customers who have had their tax credits stopped that we will prioritise their cases, and make sure that they are processed as quickly as possible.”

That was a nice thought, was it not? However, Concentrix has informed me that, just on mandatory reconsideration cases, which were returned to HMRC on 19 September, nothing at all was done until 3 October. So not only is Concentrix operating on the basis of really flimsy information; it is also telling lies to Parliament and to the Government, because I do not consider that to be prioritising cases and making sure they are processed “as quickly as possible.”

I hope the Minister will answer the specific points that I have raised. This contract has been something that, frankly, we should all be ashamed of. The way that we have treated the mums and dads on low pay who are bringing up the next generation has been shameful. And actually, although I asked for this debate about the performance of Concentrix, the responsibility for this situation fundamentally lies with the Treasury and HMRC.

The process is clear. Again, I quote Concentrix:

“ Whilst the initial decision to halt an individual’s tax credit claim may, at the end of the process, prove to have been unnecessary” — it did not feel “unnecessary” to the victims —

“the process is set by HMRC. Whether it is Concentrix managing this process or HMRC directly, the same hurdles and challenges are experienced because of the information held by HMRC at the outset.”

It seems to me that this goes to the heart of the Government’s use of information about citizens. The Government have a responsibility to assist citizens in giving them the information they require in order to assess their entitlement to something such as tax credits. The Government did that at the beginning of a tax credit claim, but their process for doing that as a tax credit claim continues is fundamentally flawed, and those flaws were made worse by the way that Concentrix operated.

I come to the conclusion that there are certain tasks that the Government simply should not delegate to a private company or to anyone else, and the collection of taxes and the issuing of tax credits is one of them. I hope that this will be the last experiment in that vein. I want to pay my taxes to the Government; I do not want to pay taxes to some company that I do not understand. Equally, I want to receive tax credits therefrom.

In future, no policy that has a disproportionate impact on women, especially those struggling to bring up a family, should be tolerated by the Government. I hope that the Minister will say that when things like this are contemplated in the future, Ministers will consider which groups in society will be disproportionately affected by their policies, in order to ensure that they do not continue to target women in the way that, frankly, this Government have throughout their existence.

Several hon. Members rose —

Mr David Nuttall (in the Chair): Order. As hon. Members can see, this is a very well subscribed debate. I intend to start the wind-ups shortly after 10.30 am, which means that from the outset I will impose a two-minute limit on all speeches.

10.6 am

Chris Law (Dundee West) (SNP): Mr Nuttall, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

Over the last few months, I have heard innumerable distressing accounts from people living in my constituency of Dundee about how the failures of this US multinational contractor are driving families immediately into poverty, driving them to food banks, driving them—in some cases—into losing their homes, and driving individuals from my constituency to make calls saying they feel suicidal because they feel they have nothing left to live for.

Unsurprisingly, this is not the first time that Government outsourcing has failed to meet expectations. In the past, we have seen that results-based contracts do not improve the quality of public services. I am sure that everyone in Westminster Hall today remembers Atos, whose shambolic and cruel tests were designed to strip away benefits from sick and disabled people. Under its contract, Concentrix is paid on a payment-by-results model when tax credit claims are cut; in other words, the more tax credit payments Concentrix puts a stop to, the more tax credit payments Concentrix puts a stop to, the more commission Concentrix makes.

The Government announcement of the termination of the Concentrix contract will not be renewed. However, the Government need to go further. They should not only put an end to the Concentrix contract immediately but call time on awarding any public contracts on a payment-by-results basis. We all need to remember that those of us who have the privilege to be Members of this House are here to serve the public. In that spirit, we need to ensure that organisations that are allowed to act on our behalf demonstrate a similar commitment to service, dignity and respect, rather than to profit. Payment-by-results contracts should have no place in the delivery of such important services —

Mr David Nuttall (in the Chair): Order. I call Mike Wood.

10.8 am

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Like many colleagues, I have seen a substantial spike in the number of tax credit inquiries following the letters from Concentrix. Our constituents expect action to be taken to ensure that benefits and tax credits are paid to the right people, and not to people who should not qualify for them. They also expect that process to be fair and sensitive. It is clear, however, that that has not been the case with Concentrix. So I am relieved — indeed, delighted — that the contract with Concentrix will not be renewed. However, we need to consider a number of questions, many of which were raised by the right hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart), about whatever contract or system replaces the current Concentrix contract.
[Mike Wood]

The first question is about the letters coming from Concentrix, including the form and style of those letters. In addition to letters that a number of my constituents have shown me, I have seen one of the letters that a member of my family received. Frankly, I would not have assumed that that letter came on behalf of the Government. It was of very poor quality; the letterhead looked as if it had been scanned in or computer-generated; and to all extents and purposes it looked like a scam, and I would have been very reluctant to respond officially to it.

We have spoken about the burden of proof and where it should lie. We also must consider the standard of proof. Concentrix has been treating the standard as beyond the realm of possibilities instead of on the balance of probabilities, and that is entirely inappropriate, particularly given what it calls the evidence. Data from credit searches and the like may be useful intelligence for starting further investigations, but they are not, in themselves, evidence. I am pleased that the contract is not being renewed, and I hope that the Minister will be able to give us some reassurance.

10.10 am

Stephen Kinnock (Aberavon) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall.

Since 6 September—just six weeks ago—I have had 11 constituents bring their complaints to me. In one case, Concentrix did not believe a young woman because it saw money from someone with the same surname going into her account. It refused to believe that it was because she handled her mother’s bills. Just because she was helping out her ageing mother, that lady had to pawn her late father’s jewellery so that she could put food on the table for her family. Another constituent’s tax credits stopped after the Concentrix system incorrectly calculated that she had worked under the threshold; it even ignored a letter that she provided from her employer. As of today, she has been without payment for nearly four months.

It is degrading to not be believed and trusted, to be considered to be cheating the system, especially when evidence and sound reason to the contrary are given. When someone is working hard to make ends meet, it is deeply insulting and demoralising to have the floor unjustly ripped out from under them.

Fortunately, the message seems to be getting through, because Concentrix has, indeed, been given the boot, but the Government’s new approach, which has ended up with their having to hire hundreds of staff into the Revenue, will end up costing millions—talk about a scam. It is degrading to not be believed and trusted, to be considered to be cheating the system, especially when evidence and sound reason to the contrary are given.

Ms Margaret Ritchie (South Down) (SDLP): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) on bringing the debate to the House. Like many right hon. and hon. Members, I have been inundated with desperate calls from constituents who have had their tax credits cut. Although blame has been apportioned to Concentrix, the company was being forced to meet targets because the contract involved payment by results. I have seen constituents reduced to tears after being accused of misdemeanours in a very humiliating and degrading way in relation to their applications. On investigation, it was found that they were not at fault at all, so all their anxiety was unfair and totally unwarranted.

Let us be clear that the fault lies with HMRC, which set the targets and placed the policy and operational failure at the door of Concentrix. The failure lies with HMRC because over the years it has been peddling a cost-cutting exercise and closing offices. We have seen that in Northern Ireland. We have seen competent staff forced to centralise in other locations. HMRC has not been doing its job properly. It has been targeting the wrong individuals—the poor and the vulnerable. Will the Minister specify what will happen to the contract? Will it be outsourced again? Frankly, I believe that HMRC needs to row back and have a much more friendly, sympathetic and humanitarian attitude towards claimants, particularly those who have been reliant, in a very unnecessary way, on food banks.

10.14 am

Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. Right hon. and hon. Members have already highlighted numerous ways in which our constituents have been badly affected and I want to highlight just one more. Constituents are suffering ongoing problems, even when mistakes by Concentrix are acknowledged and credits are reinstated. Having built up big debts to friends or family members, or even to childcare providers who agreed to keep working on the expectation that debts would be settled on the resolution of the tax credit problems, my constituents are now being told that they will get their back payments over the course of a year. That does not really help, because the major debts are due now. Will the Minister explain why HMRC cannot make the back payments now? It is not fair on our constituents and it is not fair on those who have had to help out when the Government have failed in their duty.

I agree that this was a rotten contract from the outset, with a commercial organisation making decisions about a claimant’s past eligibility and getting payment by results. The contract even specified how many cases—2 million, I think—were expected to be modified, even before a single piece of evidence was considered.

Back in July 2016, the independent Social Security Advisory Committee said that the payment model would: “potentially create a conflict of interest”. The only bit I can quibble with there is “potentially”. It was a clear conflict of interest. It becomes hard to square information from our constituents with what we are told about the performance of the contract. I read somewhere that only 120 cases had breached the contract
terms, yet I think we have had almost 120 examples of awful cases in the debate so far, so either the systems for monitoring contract performance are not up to scratch, perhaps because they rely too much on the company the performance of which is being measured, or they are monitoring the wrong things entirely.

I hope that the Government will explain what more they will do to resolve the mess, because they are not doing enough yet. Once cases are brought back in-house, they should stay there. We should not repeat the same mistakes again.

10.16 am

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) on the excellent case she has put. Like many right hon. and hon. Members, in the past few months my office has dealt with dozens of cases every week of people who have found themselves in increasingly desperate situations as a result of Concentrix investigations, and I would like to make it clear that I welcome the decision not to renew the contract. I hope that it leads to the work coming back in-house.

Some of my constituents are victims of domestic abuse and have gone to refuges and then been rehoused. Although their support workers have told Concentrix of the change in their circumstances, it has not been logged. One constituent’s brother was accused of being her partner, and another constituent was accused of co-habiting with a former tenant. Many have been drawn to the discretionary assistance fund administered by the Welsh Government and to food banks. Yes, in the medium term we need scrutiny of how that has happened, of why it has not been monitored and of the payment by results model.

HMRC staff have been drafted in to help, but there are clearly not enough of them. All credit to them, but they have suffered huge cuts over the past few years. It clearly will not take 21 days to deal with some of the cases—I have heard that it will take up to six weeks. We need to clear the backlog now, because there is much distress out there and people have suffered. We need the Minister to give a clear steer about which cases are the priority. Yes, we urgently need to learn the lessons, but we also crucially need help now for those affected, with more staff to turn cases around.

10.18 am

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): We must acknowledge the number of people who have been hurt as a result of this debacle, but it is important to point out two things. First, the history of tax credits and the way in which people have been dealt with extends well beyond the current contract. During much of my political career, before the work was ever contracted out, I have had people come to me about their difficulties with tax credits and with HMRC. So it is not a new problem; this is a complicated benefit and the issues go back some time. The contract was made by HMRC. The guidance was given by HMRC and the company acted on it. If there is any fault to be attributed, it has to be shared with the people who issued the contract in the first place.

The second thing is that HMRC has treated the workers in Concentrix diabolically. They found out in the news that they were losing the contract and therefore their jobs. That is no way to treat workers, many of whom were dedicated and simply acting on the information and the guidelines given to them. They were trying to do their job to the best of their ability.

Whether this matter is contracted out or kept in-house—I have no difficulty with contracting out some services—problems will persist so long as the attitude, the wrong information and guidance and the bureaucratic rules of HMRC continue.

10.20 am

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) on securing this debate. Like many other hon. Members, I have been appalled by the nature of the complaints that my office has received from worried constituents faced with extreme hardship following action by Concentrix to suspend their tax credits. I accept that some providers may want to conduct checks to ensure that money is being paid to the right people, but it is wholly unacceptable to stop money being paid to parents without evidence while checks are carried out. The action taken by Concentrix has caused extreme hardship for many of my constituents and people across the country. They use the money to provide food and essentials for their children and families, and to be without for a long period of time is unacceptable and has resulted in many families resorting to food banks and in some cases going without. That is utterly shameful.

Of the many cases brought to my office, one relates to a constituent who had her tax credits stopped because Concentrix believed she had an undeclared partner. Following much stress and my constituent providing extensive evidence that she did not have an undeclared partner, it transpired that the basis of the action by Concentrix was an out-of-date record of a previous tenant at her address.

While Concentrix has to bear its share of the responsibility for the hardship faced by many people in recent months, HMRC also has to bear its share for allowing things to get into this mess. Does the Minister accept responsibility for HMRC’s lack of scrutiny? What lessons will be learned before anyone else is engaged to do the work? I am particularly interested to know whether HMRC is considering retaining this work in-house rather than using the targeted payment-by-results model that has caused so much hardship and stress to so many in my constituency and across the country.

10.22 am

Owen Thompson (Midlothian) (SNP): We have all had cases of people who have been vindicated after their lives have been turned upside down. They may have had their payments reinstated and even sometimes their bank charges refunded, but what about the high-interest payments they have had to make to payday lenders? What about the jobs they have lost because their childcare provider cancelled due to lack of payment? Where is the justice in those situations?
[Owen Thompson]

In one case, a working mother of four in Midlothian lost her job because her childcare provider cancelled on her. She put out an appeal on social media to ask complete strangers to send her five-year-old son birthday cards so that he could have something of a birthday. She was so ashamed at not being able to provide her children with anything other than a basic ration pack from a food bank. How can that situation be justifiable? Members from all parties in the House have highlighted similar cases across the country featuring single parents.

Those situations are not coincidental and they were preventable. The strategy has been utterly shameful.

One thing that is clear from the Concentrix experience is that it achieved nothing and created a mess that has damaged people financially and emotionally—a mess that has been and continues to be expensive to correct. Additional resource is being appointed within HMRC and the civil service and the suggested cost of the Concentrix contract is reputed to have been £75 million so it seems fair to end my contribution by asking how much of that money will be clawed back to directly compensate those affected most.

10.23 am

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): As constituency MPs, we are all aware of the hardship and suffering caused by Concentrix. By definition, people receiving tax credits are on low incomes and are not able to cope with a sudden drop in that income. Concentrix’s “Shoot first, ask questions later” approach, in which recipients have been accused of living with people they have never heard of, it takes more than an hour for their calls to be answered, and it is suggested that they get by on payday loans while Concentrix sorts out its mistakes, caused anxiety, distress and extreme hardship. In many cases, we have had to make personal referrals to food banks, so that people can feed themselves and their children. We all have examples from our postbags and inboxes of shocking cases in which families have been left struggling to make ends meet.

By way of example, I want to put on record some of the highlights—perhaps I should say lowlights—of the many cases I have had to deal with in recent weeks, and show the pattern of incompetence that has been exposed. More than three quarters of the cases I have dealt with have been of people accused of living with the previous tenant at their address. In one case, a constituent found after asking their neighbours that the person they were intimated to Concentrix that it was disappointed that to handle the high-risk renewal cases in this way, and it intimated to Concentrix that it was disappointed that Concentrix had screened out 80% of the cases referred to it as likely to be high risk and did not pursue them further. Perhaps is one of the reasons why HMRC is taking the contract back. It perhaps feels that it could make a hotter and heavier pursuit than even Concentrix could.

The right hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) indicated, we need to look closer to Parliament when asking some of our questions. The fact is that the contract was conceived by HMRC in a spirit of suspicion and hostility towards its customers. It said that it wanted to handle the high-risk renewal cases in this way, and it intimated to Concentrix that it was disappointed that Concentrix had screened out 80% of the cases referred to it as likely to be high risk and did not pursue them further. Perhaps is one of the reasons why HMRC is taking the contract back. It perhaps feels that it could make a hotter and heavier pursuit than even Concentrix could.

10.26 am

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): I share Members’ frustrations about dealing with Concentrix in the constituency cases that come to us, but our frustration is nothing compared to the distress and desperation caused to many constituents. Let us be clear: as the right hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) indicated, we need to look closer to Parliament when asking some of our questions. The fact is that the contract was conceived by HMRC in a spirit of suspicion and hostility towards its customers. It said that it wanted to handle the high-risk renewal cases in this way, and it intimated to Concentrix that it was disappointed that Concentrix had screened out 80% of the cases referred to it as likely to be high risk and did not pursue them further. Perhaps is one of the reasons why HMRC is taking the contract back. It perhaps feels that it could make a hotter and heavier pursuit than even Concentrix could.

The right hon. Lady also touched on the significant spike in August, when even more calls to Concentrix were waiting and even more call queues could not be dealt with. That came from HMRC’s direct move to remove 45,000 people from tax credits. Some of those people were supposedly under investigation by Concentrix as high-risk renewals, but HMRC moved against them because of the annual declaration process. We have two separate processes going on, and the one thing in common is the victim: the claimant. Did Ministers know that HMRC was striking off people when they were going through the high-risk renewal claim?

The other issue I want the Minister to address is the law. The right hon. Lady raised the question of the burden of proof, but Concentrix insists that HMRC is saying that the 30-day cut-off on non-compliance is absolute and in statute. Do we need to change that law?

10.28 am

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): For too long, Concentrix left families in vulnerable situations, wondering where their next meal would come from or how they would make their next rent payment. I have heard from multiple Tooting residents—all of whom are single mothers—of the stress that Concentrix caused them by stopping their tax credits via false claims that they had a partner living in their property. My constituents found those claims so difficult to disprove, and subsequently struggled to make ends meet for many months on end.

One constituent came to me in early August. She is a single mother of a 14-year-old girl, and her tax credits were stopped by Concentrix due to her supposedly having a partner living with her—a partner who did not exist. She was left with £4 in her bank account to last her 16 days. As if that was not bad enough, two days later she was informed by the council that her housing benefit was being stopped due to her supposed change of circumstances. That left her unable to afford her rent and reliant on food banks. As if that was not bad enough, HMRC then demanded almost £4,000 in back payments for this change of situation. Some may say she was lucky: it took only one month for HMRC to overturn the termination of her tax credit and housing benefit. As we have heard, many others across the UK have had to spend many more months waiting for that result. However, I would say she is not lucky. No mother,
People deserve not only answers from Concentrix, but to know from our Government that such situations will not happen again. We have a duty; we need to reassure those who put their trust in us that we will not allow this to happen to any other family. We have a duty to protect our citizens, and that protection comes in many forms. With respect to Concentrix, we have failed in our commitment. Will the Minister today reassure us that this will not happen again?

10.30 am

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Like other Members in the Chamber, I am all too aware of the significant number of people caused great hardship by the withdrawal of tax credit payments. Many of them are in my constituency of North Ayrshire and Arran. Some of my constituents have had payments stopped because the claimant has been incorrectly accused of sharing a home with a non-existent partner. Tax credits have been suddenly and unexpectedly withdrawn, with the claimant even having difficulty in securing any kind of explanation, however misguided and mistaken that explanation turns out to be. Claimants are on the phone for hours over weeks and weeks, and are caught up in a grotesque bureaucratic nightmare. The system seems to mock their hardship, leaving them to rely on food banks.

There can be no doubt that the system is a mess. Concentrix’s indiscriminate and groundless accusations of fraud directed at low and middle-income families is completely unacceptable, and cause huge emotional distress, financial hardship and utter despair. Now we know from reports that Concentrix’s misconduct could be in breach of the Data Protection Act, since claimants’ details have been known to have been sent to the wrong address. The allegations are extremely serious and must be fully investigated by both Concentrix and HMRC. Outstanding cases must be dealt with urgently. Only then will the hardship caused end. I urge the Minister to indicate how and by when that will happen. Concentrix’s contract expires in May 2017, but the suffering continues right now. Urgent action is needed to protect claimants from this appalling situation.

10.31 am

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I, too, have been inundated with calls from desperate constituents who have had their tax credits stopped owing to accusations that they are living with another person. So far, every single one of the cases investigated has been proved false. The undue stress and pressure placed on parents is beyond belief, and the Government must take responsibility. I thank the few Government Members who have turned up to listen to the debate.

One woman had food in her freezer to feed her child, but the money on her electricity meter ran out, and the food defrosted and had to be thrown away. Another said that she was not bothered about feeding herself, but it broke her heart to see her children go hungry. People have been seriously let down by the failings of Concentrix, a company appointed by and acting under the watch of this Government. All the people affected deserve answers as to how and why such a situation was allowed to happen.

We are starting to see a slow trickle of reinstated payments, but in some cases the back pay has not been paid, the bills that were building up are turning into court summonses, and debts are growing. Unfortunately, people are having to turn to payday loans and loan sharks. The dilemma my constituents face is whether they ask for another mandatory reconsideration to investigate the missing back pay and risk having their payments stopped again. I simply cannot express my feelings of anger towards those responsible for this monumental failure and for the damage done to thousands of needy families across the country. It is not good enough simply to say that the contract will not be renewed. We need an urgent investigation into how this happened in the first place. Furthermore, we need to know that all the cases still open will be resolved urgently, and we need complete assurance that this will never be allowed to happen again.

10.33 am

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Julie Molyneux, a constituent of mine, was accused of working for only 15 hours, when she had worked 16.5. She phoned HMRC and was told to phone Concentrix. She phoned Concentrix and was told to phone HMRC. She went round and round in circles. Her tax credits were stopped for eight weeks and she was forced to live on £63 a week, with two children to look after, one of whom is disabled. It was acknowledged that a mistake was made, but it has still not been put right.

Hayley Jones was accused of living with a previous tenant. She tried to get through to the system for a week without any luck. She finally got through, but was put on hold for an hour and a half. When she told them she had sent in all the relevant documents, they denied receiving them. She was left without money for eight weeks. She had no money at all and four children to support.

Paula Bee was informed—that was new to her—that she was living with an ex-partner, when he was living somewhere else. She had to try to track him down so she could supply a copy of his rent agreement. What did not get paid as a result of that? People have been unable to get through to the telephone helpline. When constituents do get through, they are placed on hold for more than an hour, in the worst case. Operators are rude to them when they are trying to resolve problems. Single women are told that they are living with other people, and it always turns out to be previous tenants. Concentrix says it has not received forms. It says people should ring HMRC, and HMRC says they should ring Concentrix. Nobody responds to letters for a very long time.

This situation has to stop. It has to be put right. My constituents who have been affected must have it put right now.

10.35 am

Ms Tasmina Ahmed-Sheikh (Ochil and South Perthshire) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) on securing this debate, and I congratulate all the Members here who have
demonstrated real compassion and understanding on this matter. The Minister might not have been on the other side of phone calls from constituents, but it is worth making the point that people who phone our constituency offices are at desperation point—at their wits’ end. Indeed, our constituency office staff are finding it extremely difficult to deal with people in dire need of help. I hope the Minister will take that into account when considering my further points.

We have all faced a number of these cases. On 14 September, I asked the Financial Secretary to the Treasury what the turnaround time would be for dealing with cases, and I was told four working days. On 29 September, in a phone conversation with HMRC, we were told it would be two to three weeks before cases were looked at. On 4 October, I was told the four-day period had been dispensed with. That is not good enough. I have a constituent who set up a food bank, but who is now a customer of that food bank. I know of a mother who cannot afford childcare and had to resign from her job, a mother who cannot afford lunch money to send her children to school with, and a mother who had to sign herself out of hospital after a suspected heart attack to deal with the issue. These are really serious matters, so I have a list of suggestions that the Minister might take on board so that these people can achieve justice immediately.

HMRC should provide a free phone line for people to use. It is ridiculous that people spend between 8p and 10p a minute to speak to HMRC and hold on for hours. On hardship payments, I understand that HMRC will call people, but they get two call-back chances. If HMRC does not get someone in those two phone calls, they will not get the hardship payment. When people have a small sum of money, and have to decide whether to feed the children, or top up or reconnect the phone, what do people do? They do what we expect them to do: they feed their children. Such situations must come to an end.

The call-back service that is provided should be there for people to use. People could leave a voicemail or press a button in order to get a guaranteed call back from HMRC. Our constituents should not be chasing HMRC for money that is rightfully theirs. It is not their fault.

On the posting of documents, HMRC should distribute postage-paid envelopes to our constituents, so that they bear no cost when sending documents back to HMRC to have cases processed. On the contract that has been cancelled, of course that is welcome, but I want to look further into that contract. Did it reach its natural conclusion? Did the Government simply decide not to renew? What compensation is available to our constituents for the situation in which they find themselves as a result of a contract that has not served the Government well?

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): My understanding is that the maximum compensation is £100, which is a paltry amount when people have been plunged into debt and uncertainty.

Ms Ahmed-Sheikh: I agree. On the £100 payment, there is a lot of haziness around it. Some of my constituents have not taken up the payment because there is no clarity around whether it is repayable or not. Again, that has to be dealt with. As I have said, if someone does not receive the phone call offering them £100, they do not get it, so if someone does not have a phone because they choose food over contact with HMRC, they do not get anything.

We do not have much time and I want to give time to the Minister to answer these important questions. Apart from the suggestions that I made on what HMRC should immediately do, these are my key questions for the Treasury: what is the latest guidance given by HMRC bosses to call handlers on how long a person can wait for the tax credit payments to be restarted? How many cases have been resolved, and how many are outstanding? On the impact on victims, what estimate have the Government made of the average cost to each customer in lost payments? What assistance is there to help claimants meet the costs of requesting a mandatory reconsideration?

What are the criteria for offering emergency interim payments? Are all victims eligible, or only those whose cases have been highlighted through the MP hotline? Why has the existence of those payments not been publicised? It is not in the wider public domain. How many victims satisfy the criteria, and how many have been offered the payment?

Why did the contract between HMRC and Concentrix incentivise the company to cancel tax credit payments? What a disgrace! Of course that is a conflict of interest, as suggested by the independent Social Security Advisory Committee in July. Why was the contract so badly managed? Will the work be brought back in-house following the end of the contract, or will a new external contractor be sought? Please will a Minister do the right thing by our constituents and give them the money that they need, and rightfully deserve?

10.40 am

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Mr Nuttall. I start by thanking my right hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) for enabling Members to consider this matter, as well as hon. Members from across the House who have attended and spoken. I counted 24 interventions or speeches, and there was a theme in the words that were used time and again—words such as “shameful”, “shocking”, “distressing”, “desperation”, “anger” and “despair”.

Like other hon. Members, I have received many letters and phone calls from constituents who, to their shock and bewilderment, have found their child tax credits stopped, with little explanation and with few avenues of recourse. Under the Government’s contract with Concentrix, thousands of innocent mothers—the vast majority are working mothers—were in effect branded fraudsters and cheats. At the drop of a hat, they saw money that they desperately needed for their children taken away, notwithstanding their entitlement to it. Yet the company is not solely at fault—the Government are, too. Despite the protestations that the Minister will no doubt make today, the Government gave Concentrix a contract that was a licence to harass and was open to abuse. It does not take Sherlock Holmes to work out that if a company is paid commission to find tax credit error and fraud, it will start with the easy targets so as to turn an even easier profit.
What is more shocking is that the victims, which is what they are, did not have the means of fighting back. They were disfranchised. Hon. Members have spoken of the need to intervene personally in many cases to get movement. The whole process was deeply flawed and, as has been suggested, operated on the presumption that people were guilty until proven innocent—a concept completely alien and contradictory to our values, and our sense of justice, fairness and decency.

Under the system, the occupant of a household was sent a letter by Concentrix accusing them of not meeting the standards for child tax credit. The letter demanded that they get in touch to present evidence of their living arrangements. Having received the letter, some constituents attempted to call Concentrix, only to find the number busy, a point that has also been made. When Concentrix did not hear back from the person, who may not have received the letter in the first place, another letter was summarily sent, stopping tax credit payments. As far as I am aware, at no point was a Government Minister consulted or asked to sign off the process—can the Minister tell us otherwise? Instead, a private foreign company, whose sole interest was profit, was allowed to withdraw tax credits on behalf of the British Government. That is what makes the contract so unique: the vast power Concentrix had to act on putative information.

Jon Thompson, the chief executive of HMRC, confirms that in this novel approach, it was the first time such checks had been carried out by an external provider. Even Atos did not have the power to withdraw benefits Concentrix had carte blanche. The Government were in fact planning to renew the contract for a job well done. They did not care to ask why Concentrix had so many savings on its books, or to listen to the complaints of many of our constituents. It was the Labour party that originally called the National Audit Office to investigate the and Labour party that has pushed for oversight and a clear lack of oversight by the Government. On that needs to be looked at.

We see the austerity cuts hitting women hardest, and the Government changing women’s pension age. Now have still not received repayments from Concentrix. Jon Thompson, the chief executive of HMRC, confirms that in this novel approach, it was the first time such processes, we will be back here in six or 12 months’ time, looking at another company that has abused a Government contract for profit and, in so doing, deprived some of the most vulnerable people of much-needed financial support. The situation needs to be sorted; otherwise, I fear the fiasco will be repeated and the Minister will be doing an encore in due course.

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Simon Kirby): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Nuttall, in my first debate in Westminster Hall. I give the Financial Secretary’s apologies: she is on a Bill Committee and cannot be in two places at once. I have listened carefully to what has been a very interesting debate and will do my best to answer all the questions.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) on securing the debate and take this opportunity to thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their efforts, not just in the debate but during the past few weeks, supporting constituents and bringing to our attention the difficulties that constituents are experiencing with their claims for tax credits. I reassure hon. Members that we are making every effort possible to resolve those difficulties as soon as possible and to make sure that the support provided through tax credits reaches those who really need it. There is no doubt that last month we were falling short in the level of customer service that we were providing to claimants, and I am very sorry about that.

In our efforts to tackle error and fraud in tax credits, we had engaged Concentrix to investigate claims and it did help us to drive down error and fraud to almost the lowest level since tax credits began. However, faced with a high volume of calls, Concentrix struggled to provide the kind of service that people had a right to expect—indeed, the kind of service stipulated in its contract.

Melanie Onn: Would my hon. Friend add two further questions: whether Concentrix has applied for any more contracts in the last month, and whether it will be prevented from bidding for any future contracts with this Government?

Peter Dowd: Those are important questions, which I am sure the Minister will pick up on in his response. I fear that unless the Government get to grips with their commissioning processes, we will be back here in six or 12 months’ time, looking at another company that has abused a Government contract for profit and, in so doing, deprived some of the most vulnerable people of much-needed financial support. The situation needs to be sorted; otherwise, I fear the fiasco will be repeated and the Minister will be doing an encore in due course.

Mr David Nuttall (in the Chair): Order. I ask the Minister to leave, if possible, a couple of minutes at the end of his speech so that the right hon. Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) has time to wind up the debate.
That led to a stressful time for a lot of people, including some of the most vulnerable, as they struggled to reach Concentrix to resolve any queries about their entitlement to tax credits. Let me be clear that that was not good enough, which is why we stepped in to get things back on track.

**Ms Angela Eagle:** Where did the information, particularly on cohabitation, come from? So many of our constituents have been accused of cohabiting with the previous tenant of their usually rented property. Were the data HMRC-matched or did Concentrix do it all on its own?

**Simon Kirby:** I am going to reach that point later. Very briefly, HMRC provided third-party data to Concentrix, which then chose who to pursue from those data.

**Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): We have heard today of constituents who have lost employment, college courses and access to childcare, and have been forced to go to food banks and take out payday loans, which inflicts stress and trauma not only on the parents but on the children. Having admitted that it was the responsibility of HMRC as well as Concentrix, will the Minister commit to expanding the compensation available to reflect the hardship and trauma inflicted on those people?

**Simon Kirby:** I will make some progress, and if the hon. Gentleman listens carefully, he may well hear some things that are helpful to that question. Before I turn to those points, let me outline what we are doing.

First, as my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary announced in the House last month, HMRC is not passing any new cases to Concentrix. We have been very clear that the contract will not be renewed beyond the end date of May 2017. Secondly, staff at HMRC are, as we speak, making every effort to resolve all open cases to ensure people get the payments they need and deserve. HMRC took back 181,000 outstanding cases from Concentrix and it has already dealt with more than 149,000—82%—of them. I would like to reassure everyone whose case remains open that we are making every effort to complete those cases within the next couple of weeks. It really is a priority.

**Angela Crawley:** Will the Minister give way?

**Simon Kirby:** I will not give way.

Thirdly, anyone who does not agree with Concentrix’s decision has a right to ask for a review called a mandatory reconsideration. HMRC has allocated its own staff to carry out such reviews within 21 days of the request. It is a large organisation with flexible staffing, so it is able to deal with peaks and troughs of demand. The hon. Member for Aberavon (Stephen Kinnock) mentioned the issue of extra costs, but I am confident that there will not be any.

**Patricia Gibson:** Given the extra work being created for HMRC to clean up the mess created by Concentrix, does the Minister have any view on the fact that one third of HMRC staff will be cut by 2021?

**Simon Kirby:** As I said, HMRC has a large number of staff, who are flexible and deal with the peaks and troughs of demand. If HMRC, after receiving the relevant information and reviewing the case, finds that the claimant is entitled to tax credits, they can expect to see that money in their bank accounts within four working days.

Lastly, we are working with hon. Members. Members to help their constituents who are struggling to resolve any issues. We have extended opening hours and have put extra advisers on the tax credits hotline for MPs, which is now handling about 200 calls a day. I am pleased to inform hon. Members that my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary, following last month’s drop-in session, will be holding another session tomorrow in the House of Commons Library.

**Angela Crawley:** The news that HMRC will not renew the contract with Concentrix is welcome. Those responsible for these reprehensible practices should be held to account. When these services are brought back in-house, we must ensure that the blanket, baseless accusations and sanctions that have been applied will stop and that compensation will be made for the Government’s mistake. Will the Minister take the opportunity to apologise to my constituents and the women and men up and down the country who have experienced the Government’s failure?

**Simon Kirby:** None of us in this Chamber wants anyone not to receive money that they are entitled to, especially if they are parents with young, vulnerable children. It is up to all of us to help our constituents and ensure we once again provide a fast and efficient service to everyone.

Let me turn to some of the issues that were raised. I do not have a lot of time, so hon. Members will have to bear with me. I acknowledge the points made by many hon. Members about the contract. HMRC will be undertaking a lessons-learned exercise, and it will share those lessons across the Government. It is clear that they will help to inform other contracts in the future.

**Mark Durkan:** In that lessons-learned exercise, will HMRC look at the question of the so-called high-risk renewal scheme, which is at the very heart of all the troubles that our constituents have suffered?

**Simon Kirby:** There will be a number of reviews, and all lessons learned will be looked at in an open-minded manner. We will consider all elements of what has gone wrong and try to ensure that the mistakes, which have clearly happened, are not repeated.

I have talked about how the data are given to Concentrix. It is up to Concentrix to choose who to contact from those data. The £100 hardship payment is important. It is available to everyone, not just through the MPs’ hotline. It is not necessarily a one-off payment; future payments can be made if there is a delay in the decision. I encourage people in hardship to apply for it, because it is there to help people while we sort out this mess.

The hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) talked about the 30-day cut-off period. I can tell him that most customers have been able to provide the information required within 30 days. There was a question about money being clawed back from Concentrix. Concentrix is not paid for wrong decisions, and payment is reduced...
where it fails to meet performance standards. That is still happening. At the end of the day, it is paid to do a job, and if it does not do the job, it is not paid for it. I have noted the comments about letters being lost.

In conclusion, I thank everyone here. This has been a short debate, and it would have been nice to have more time for contributions. I am here to listen, and I have listened very carefully.

10.58 am

Fiona Mactaggart: I thank the Minister for that response. This is probably my first experience of leading a debate in which everybody apart from the Minister has agreed with one another. I thank all hon. Members who contributed.

I am particularly concerned about the Minister’s account—I know he is not the Minister responsible, but I hope he will pass this on to the Financial Secretary—which implies that this is just a recent phenomenon, because it is not. It has existed for a long time; it is not just a recent failure. I also do not accept that Concentrix should be wholly blamed. I note that the Minister said it is up to Concentrix to choose which information to use. I would like him to write to me after this debate to tell me whether it is true that HMRC pressed Concentrix to use data on cases in which it was not even able to name the claimed partner. That shows that HMRC is responsible for this oppression of women. The Minister did not note in his response the concern expressed by many Members that this is a gendered policy—

Mr David Nuttall (in the Chair): Order.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Earlier Cancer Diagnosis: NHS Finances

11 am

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered earlier cancer diagnosis and NHS finances.

I thank Mr Speaker for allowing this debate and you, Mr. Nuttall, for presiding over it. I also take this opportunity to welcome the Minister to his new post. He has been in it a while now, but this might be his first Westminster Hall debate. We look forward to working with him—he comes highly recommended—and I thank him for accepting the invitation, on behalf of the Secretary of State for Health, who was unable to make the appointment, to speak at our Britain Against Cancer conference in December.

Early diagnosis has been a key theme of the all-party group on cancer for some time. We call it the “magic key” to cancer. If we can drive forward on our rates of early diagnosis, the stage at which we first detect cancer, we can improve survival rates significantly.

I should perhaps briefly explain to the Minister that there is a little history to this involvement. Back in 2009, the all-party group published the report of an inquiry it had conducted into cancer inequalities. We found that patients in the NHS at the one-year point since their cancers were detected stand as much chance of surviving to the five-year point as they would in any other healthcare system. Where we let ourselves down, however, is getting patients to the one-year point. That suggests that the NHS is as good as any other healthcare provider in treating cancers once detected, but poor at detecting them in the first place.

In this country, our survival rates have been ticking up, with the rate of improvement broadly similar to that in other countries, but our survival rates still stand well below those of many other countries. For example, in this country the overall one-year survival rate is about 70% or 71%, but in Sweden it is 82%. That might not sound like a big difference, but overlay that differential with regard to the population of the UK as a whole and it tells us that tens of thousands of lives a year are needlessly being lost because we are diagnosing too late.

We need to focus on early diagnosis, and the Minister is in a unique position to be able to make a real difference to a large number of people if we can get it right. Yes, cancer survival rates are improving, but they are improving around the world and we are still well behind international averages. We welcome the improvements, but we have still not yet seen that kick-up that will allow us to catch up with those international averages.

Our 2009 report came up with, in essence, one recommendation. Reports can always come up with myriad recommendations, but we believe in short reports and, having consulted with the wider cancer community, the good and the great of the cancer world, the charities, patients and so forth, we came up with one recommendation: to ensure that we focus the local NHS, the clinical commissioning groups, primary care trusts then, CCGs now—on their one-year survival rates.
The logic is simple: the earlier we diagnose, the better our one-year survival rates. They are therefore a good measure of how successful we are in diagnosing early. Late diagnosis makes for poor one-year figures, so we get the CCGs to focus on the one-year figure and, if there is a line of accountability there, they will be encouraged to focus on how to improve earlier diagnosis and introduce initiatives promoting earlier diagnosis.

Mr Baron: We certainly have to be inclusive with regards to how we look at treatment generally. As my hon. Friend knows, the all-party group and, indeed, the wider cancer community are looking at such things. He comes to our meetings, and we listen carefully. Questions certainly need to be answered on that front, so he is pushing at an open door. We have an open mind, and we are listening.

Together with the wider cancer community—at the end of the day it has been a team approach—we have been successful in ensuring that CCGs are now held accountable. The one-year survival rates have been included in the delivery dashboard of the assurance framework, and that is very good news. Figures have only been published for the past one or two years, so we are still seeing what is happening with regards to improvements and how CCGs are performing, but at least we have made a start and there is an element of accountability.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I must of course declare that I am a dentist and so have considerable professional interest in the subject, although it is rare that I am in the surgery. I am also chair of the all-party group on skin, and one might think that diagnosing skin cancer is fairly obvious, in particular given that skin problems are a major concern of GPs. However, one of the things we soon discovered was that undergraduate tuition time on skin conditions is extremely short—often a week or two weeks, which are frequently used by undergraduates, as I understand it, as an opportunity to go away, rather than to attend. If the education of GPs and doctors was better and reinforced by continuing professional development, we might get better results on skin cancer.

Mr Baron: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention.

We have been successful in getting the one-year figures into the DNA of the NHS, but there is no point having the tools in the toolkit if we do not use them, and one thing we are looking carefully at is the lines of accountability. We acknowledge that we are pushing at an open door—the Government have kindly accepted the need for the one-year figures—but there is still a very long way to travel. The latest Ofsted-style ratings have maintained the focus on survival rates, and yet those ratings still found that eight out of 10 CCGs must improve. That shows the scale of the challenge and the extent to which we need to raise our game.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): If I could cast the hon. Gentleman’s mind back to the previous intervention, the Be Clear on Cancer campaign identified about 700 more patients with lung cancer, which led to about 300 more patients receiving life-saving surgery. That shows that publicity campaigns work. Does he agree that the Government need to encourage the NHS to have more publicity campaigns to identify the issues and save more lives?

Mr Baron: I agree completely. Briefly, the initiatives that could be introduced to promote earlier diagnosis are greater awareness campaigns, better diagnostics at primary care level, better uptake of screening in screening programmes, and better GP awareness—although this is not only about GPs. A whole host of initiatives could be introduced at the primary care level to improve survival rates and awareness generally. So yes, I completely and utterly agree.

Given the limited time available, I will make a little progress on the central point of this debate. We are pushing at an open door, which is fine; we are keeping a watching brief as a cancer community; and, as I have said, the Ofsted-style ratings have shown, among other things, that a big improvement is required. The all-party group on cancer will hold its annual parliamentary reception next summer—the Minister no doubt will be invited to that—at which we will focus on those CCGs that have most improved their one-year survival rates. The Britain Against Cancer conference, which we believe is the largest gathering of the cancer community in this country, will take place at the end of this year and will also focus on that issue.

We are therefore not walking away from the issue of survival rates, but we are saying as part of our watching brief that we wish to bring to the Government’s attention the fact that when it comes to cancer treatment, earlier diagnosis can not only help patients—diagnosing cancers earlier makes for better survival rates—but save a lot of money. The later cancer is diagnosed, the more aggressive the treatments and the higher the cost. That cost is quite significant, and the cost savings from earlier diagnosis could be ploughed back into treatment for patients. At a time when the NHS is under financial pressure, we suggest that too little attention is being paid to those potential cost savings. Too little work has been done by the NHS and too few health economists are looking at how reducing costs to such an extent would benefit both the taxpayer and, most importantly, patients.

Given the NHS’s lack of focus on that area, we have had to go to outside sources to give us some sort of measure of the potential cost savings. A September 2014 report by Incisive Health and Cancer Research UK showed quite a disparity between the cost of treating patients with early stage, or stage 1, cancer and those with late stage, or stages 3 and 4, cancer. For example, the cost per patient per year of treating colon cancer is £3,300 at stage 1 and £12,500 at stage 4—a near fourfold increase. Treating stage 1 rectal cancer costs £4,400; that goes up to nearly £12,000 if it is treated at a late stage.
Treating ovarian cancer costs just over £5,000 per patient per year at an early stage, but £15,000 at a late stage. That report focused on four cancers: colon, rectal, lung and ovarian. They amount to only around a fifth of all cancers diagnosed, but if such cost savings were replicated across all cancers, we could be talking about savings of hundreds of millions of pounds, and that is before we even consider the number of patients who would benefit from earlier diagnosis, which Incisive Health cites as something like £2,000.

Mark Durkan (Foyle) (SDLP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Baron: I ask for a bit of patience. Let me make a little progress, and if there is time, I will take further interventions.

That report also showed variation between the highest and lowest-performing CCGs in the proportion of patients diagnosed early. That is also important. In colorectal cancer the variation was threefold, in lung cancer it was fourfold and in ovarian cancer it was fivefold. It is clear that if we could ensure that all CCGs achieved the best rate of early diagnosis—the rate achieved by the top performing CCG—significant cost savings could be made.

Those are interesting figures. Many believe them to be conservative—with a small “c”—in the sense that we often forget the costs of treatment later on down the care pathway beyond diagnosis, but we are certainly talking about hundreds of millions of pounds. One could argue that that is a drop in the ocean when we are looking at the NHS budget, but patients—cancer patients in particular—could certainly benefit from a couple of hundred million pounds. In an age when it is all too easy for politicians to talk about spending more money, we are trying to focus on potential cost savings from encouraging earlier diagnosis. As prevalence rises—Macmillan Cancer Support believes there may be another half a million cancer patients in the next five years, in addition to the around 2.5 million we have at the moment—so will costs, so the need for such savings will grow in importance.

The most recent report of the all-party parliamentary group on cancer followed an oral evidence session with the then cancer Minister and key decision makers in NHS England, as well as written evidence from more than 30 cancer-related organisations. That report concluded that where the new initiatives outlined in the cancer strategy could save costs, those initiatives required more focus and attention. It is our opinion that there needs to be greater appreciation in NHS England and the Department of Health of the savings that earlier diagnosis offers. As I have said, there are too few health economists working in the NHS, and even fewer looking at this area.

As the Minister is well aware, when I raised that issue at Health questions last week, he correctly referred to some ongoing studies, including the three-year research project being undertaken by Macmillan Cancer Support in a related area. He also mentioned Public Health England, which is looking at cost-effective initiatives for colorectal cancers. Those studies are welcome, but I maintain that the approach is piecemeal. We need a root and branch approach to look more specifically at this area. We need to promote earlier diagnosis at CCG and health and wellbeing board level. We have the one-year figures. We must not allow this to become a tick-box exercise; the issue is far too important for that. There needs to be greater focus on how underperforming CCGs will be held to account for their rate of improvement.

The all-party parliamentary group on cancer will play its full part in that work. We are looking at other areas. We have achieved our goal of getting the one-year figures into the DNA of the NHS, and we certainly will not walk away. We are focused on several areas, including patient experience and rarer cancers. There cannot be a meaningful improvement in the one-year figures if rarer cancers are not included, as those account for more than half the cancers that are diagnosed. We will play our full part, which includes the annual reception and the Britain Against Cancer conference, but I would be interested to hear the Minister’s responses to the questions I have raised. What more does he believe the NHS can do to promote and focus on cost savings from earlier diagnosis? On behalf of the wider cancer community, and certainly the all-party parliamentary groups, including the cancer-specific groups represented by several hon. Members in the Chamber, may I request a meeting with the Minister to discuss this and other related cancer issues?

11.17 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Nuttall, in my second Westminster Hall debate since I became a Minister. I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Basildon and Billericay (Mr Baron) on securing this debate and raising the valid points that he did and on his stewardship of the APPG on cancer, which is highly effective and has provided a large part of the briefings that I have received since becoming a Minister. I very much hope that he will carry on that work, and I am sure that he will.

My hon. Friend mentioned several times the phrase “pushing at an open door,” and I reassure him that the door is open. We have discussed this issue twice in fairly formal circumstances, and I am keen to take him up on his offer of meeting him and colleagues to discuss it further and make progress over and above what we can do in Westminster Hall debates and oral questions. I also look forward to speaking at the event in December.

I will talk, as Ministers do, about the progress that we are making in this area across England, but my hon. Friend reminded us that we are not best in class or among the best in Europe, and he is absolutely right. He gave us the statistics for Sweden, where the one-year survival rate is 82% versus our 71%. That is a target; it is where we need to get to. As we have made progress, we have got to where the best in Europe were several years ago. We need to keep progressing in that respect.

My hon. Friend rightly talked about CCG accountability, and I will talk a little about that. I want to emphasise the power of what was done last month, when we published the four indicators for every CCG in the country. That is a massive commitment to transparency, and we were quite open that many CCGs needed to improve.

My hon. Friend mentioned the figure of, I think, 80%, which we agree with. It is worth analysing the data and spending a bit of time looking at that, because small
I want to thank the Members who intervened in the debate. As ever, my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (David Tredinnick) reminded us of the role that complementary remedies can play as part of an overall solution. There is no impediment to that in the NHS—CCGs can commission what they wish to commission. He mentioned the Barts study. My view is that it needs to be clear that commissioning is science driven, repeatable and all that goes with that, but there is no impediment if CCGs wish to commission complementary therapies.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford), in his capacity as chair of the all-party group on skin, told us how weak some of the training in that area may be at undergraduate level. I was not aware of that, so I will take it up and come back to him. It does not sound acceptable if the skin cancer diagnosis part of the syllabus is the bit that people leave.

Sir Paul Beresford: If I could emphasise that a little more, we have a distinct shortage of consultant dermatologists. They are backed up by GPs with a special interest, but a large number of referrals to dermatologists are made due to fear on the part of both the patient and the doctor that they will miss a melanoma or a squamous cell carcinoma when the doctor should be able to diagnose them. Many are dealt with in the early stage with cryosurgery, which is a very effective, quick treatment that I know, having been on the wrong end of it quite often, can be undertaken by a GP who has had the right education.

David Mowat: I thank my hon. Friend for that and for reminding us that at the core of the debate is a point we all agree on: early diagnosis is the key, whether it is for cost-saving purposes—I will come on to some of the points my hon. Friend, he quoted the Department of Health as to whether for all cancer types in all instances earlier diagnosis does save costs because of the increase in cost and effort associated with the diagnosis—the early screening and all that goes with that. That was not addressed overtly in Cancer Research UK’s “Saving lives, averting costs” report, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend. He quoted numbers of several millions of pounds, and there is no doubt that stage 4 cancer costs massively more to treat than stage 1 cancer, but whether or not there are clear cost savings in all instances and even if we dispute the detail of some of those numbers, we go back to the point made by the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford).

David Mowat: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention and completely agree with the point he made. In this instance, there is no competition between saving money, saving lives and doing the right thing. In a sense, there is a secondary question as to just how much cost is saved, and the balance of cost saving versus doing more diagnostically, because in order to save lives, which is a highly cost-effective thing to do and the right thing to do, we need to do more on early diagnosis.

I have not yet got to the start of my remarks and I have a lot of pages to get through, so I will not be giving too much detail. It is worth acknowledging that cancer survival rates are increasing in the UK. In terms of improvement, between 2011 and 2015 we think something like 12,000 lives a year were saved. That exceeds the goals we set out in the cancer outcomes strategy in 2011.

Last year we saw a 91% increase in urgent GP referrals of patients with suspected cancer—that is another 822,000 patients. That shows a massive increase in NHS resources and all that goes with that, and we are beginning to see those early referrals, and the different guidelines GPs are using to refer, start to come through in the one-year survival statistics. However, as my hon. Friend, the Member for Basildon and Billericay reminded us, that does not mean that we are the best in Europe. We need to continue the drive to improve.

The cancer strategy produced by the cancer taskforce is the backbone of what we are trying to achieve. The—I think it is fair to say—acclaimed strategy it produced, “Achieving World-Class Cancer Outcomes”, was published last year. It had 96 recommendations in it, and the Government accepted all 96. We are now putting in place an implementation taskforce. We believe that if we are able to make the progress we expect by 2020, a further 30,000 lives a year can be saved.

Recommendation 96 is the one we are talking about today. It essentially says that we need to do a lot more on early diagnosis because of the cost savings that will potentially arise from that. There are differing views in the Department of Health as to whether for all cancer types in all instances earlier diagnosis does save costs because of the increase in cost and effort associated with the diagnosis—the early screening and all that goes with that. That was not addressed overtly in Cancer Research UK’s “Saving lives, averting costs” report, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend. He quoted numbers of several millions of pounds, and there is no doubt that stage 4 cancer costs massively more to treat than stage 1 cancer, but whether or not there are clear cost savings in all instances and even if we dispute the detail of some of those numbers, we go back to the point made by the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan) that early diagnosis is the right thing to do. My hon. Friend also mentioned that there are not enough health economists in the NHS; the truth is there are not enough of lots of things in the NHS. Early diagnosis is
Mr Baron: I am conscious that I am eating into the few minutes the Minister has left, but the point about cost savings links to the point made earlier about initiatives and processes for earlier diagnosis. I urge him to think carefully about this, as I know he is doing. There has been no shortage of process targets in the NHS, but the one-year survival figures focus on outcomes, and that is the true measure of whether the processes are having an effect. By using outcome measures, we are leaving a large element of discretion to CCGs to introduce the initiatives they think best fit their local populations. That does not necessarily mean big cost increases to introduce such initiatives. Better awareness campaigns and better screening uptake figures do not necessarily cost a lot of money at a local level; they just take a bit of thought.

David Mowat: I agree completely with my hon. Friend that it is right that we use outcome measures. I come back to the point that the Government did a big thing in publishing the statistics for every CCG in the country. That allowed headlines to be out there in the press—we all saw them—that 80% of CCGs need to improve. We used a pretty rigorous test to assess the CCGs. If we reach those levels, we will be close to being the best in Europe as we make progress.

I am coming towards the end of my time. I want to finish by re-emphasising the Government’s commitment to early diagnosis. I have not had a chance to talk about our public health measures and all that goes with them, but I thank my hon. Friend again for getting us this debate. I emphasise my commitment to work with him and the APPG to make progress in this area.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.

Healthcare (Devon)

2.30 pm

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered healthcare provision in Devon.

It is a great honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main, which I am sure will be fair and impartial; if only that were the case elsewhere in the House. It is a particular pleasure to welcome the Minister of State, Department of Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne); I fear he has had quite a few outings already this week, and will have more. I make no apology for summoning him here, on behalf of my colleagues from Devon, to address an issue that will not go away any time soon. I suspect that this will be one of many occasions on which we will seek to ask pertinent questions on behalf of our constituents across the county.

Healthcare is one of the biggest issues in Devon, largely for two reasons. The first is the demographics of the county: 17.7% of the UK population are aged 65 and over; that rises to 21.1% in the south-west and, in my part of the south-west—East Devon—to 27.7%, which is 10% more than the national average. Secondly, reforms are coming down the line, involving bed closures and so forth, that are sometimes seen as controversial. They are a result of the perilous state of Devon’s NHS, which is there for us all to see. Before we start our long list of asks and demands, it is worth remembering that the Northern, Eastern and Western Devon clinical commissioning group’s financial deficit is due to hit £490 million by 2019, which is clearly unsustainable.

Before I launch into my pleas and points, I point out the absence of some colleagues from Devon from across the political spectrum who I know feel passionately about this. The right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) and my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston) are both detained in the Select Committee on Health. I believe that they have either just interviewed, or are interviewing as we speak, the Secretary of State for Health and the chief executive of NHS England. Of course, my hon. Friend the Member for Central Devon (Mel Stride) is unable to take part in the debate on account of his particular office. He has an excellent relationship with the GPs in his constituency, and he is supportive of wellbeing hubs, provided they serve the local community appropriately.

On the whole, we welcome the Government’s intervention in Devon’s NHS in the form of the success regime. If followed properly, it will help to solve some of the underlying problems that beset Devon’s national health service. As part of its work, the success regime, along with the CCG, has recently published proposals to close 72 hospital beds in Exeter and East Devon. The Minister will quite properly respond that that is under consultation, but I think this is the only way that we can raise these points in a public forum to make sure that everybody knows what we are thinking.

I understand that recently, the success regime, although it has a preferred option, which includes the rather expensive Labour deal on Tiverton hospital, has now introduced a “none of the above” option. If that is now
Sir Hugo Swire: As my hon. Friend knows, Plymouth is a unitary authority; Exmouth is the biggest town in Devon. Local people—my constituents—are hugely supportive of our community hospitals. We have beds in Exmouth and Sidmouth; in Ottery St Mary we have 16 stroke beds, although they are eventually to be replaced by a health hub; and Budleigh Salterton hospital, which I will talk about in due course, will, I hope, be turned into a health and wellbeing hub.

Over the years, many local residents have donated significant sums to the hospitals. In Sidmouth alone, the Sidmouth Victoria hospital comfort fund has raised over £5 million. Local people are prepared to invest in ensuring first-class local health services. I pray in aid the position of Sid valley Admiral nurse—the Admiral nurse helps people with dementia—which was hugely supported locally. I am pleased to say that I was able to play my part in obtaining additional funding for that position from the Big Lottery Fund. If there is an identifiable health issue locally, people are prepared to back care with their own money.

If the Minister will allow me, I will talk about the consultation process and the lack of documentation. As I understand it, the consultation process has been overwhelmingly carried out online; there are very few paper copies of the consultation. Elderly people, who may have no access to the internet and who are disproportionately likely to be affected by the changes, are therefore disadvantaged. The consultation period ends on Friday 6 January. I ask the Minister to do everything he can to look at the issue, and to work out how we can get more people involved in what is, after all, an extraordinarily important process.

The potential closure of hospital beds raises the issue of 21st century healthcare, which obviously includes preventive as well as curative care. My constituents—like many across the country, we are told—prefer to be treated at home for as long as possible. They understand, on the whole, that community hospitals need to change and adapt in order to offer a service fit for the 21st century. In Budleigh Salterton, we have been working very hard to try to ensure that the community hospital is transformed into a health and wellbeing hub, which will involve bringing together the health, social care and voluntary sectors. I think that is a good template that can possibly be used across the country. In fact, if it works, there will be far greater footfall through the community hospital than there has been while it has been just a hospital. I remain very supportive of that.

There is, of course, a negative side to keeping people in hospital beds. According to Angela Pedder, the lead chief executive of the success regime, the cost of running a 16-bed community hospital ward is £75,000 a month. Home care could look after 82 people for the same money. However, we are in danger of putting the cart before the horse. Until we can absolutely ensure that we have got social care right, we should not look at unnecessarily closing community beds that some people will have to use. Equally, I am nervous that, just because we have well-supported community hospitals across East Devon, we are being targeted unfairly, so as to rebalance the books across other parts of the county.

If we are reducing the number of hospital beds, it is absolutely essential that the social care system is able to compensate for that loss. In the past five years, council budgets for social care have fallen behind demand by £5 billion, and 150,000 fewer people receive at-home help than five years ago. Social care can take the financial pressure off the NHS. For instance, the installation of a simple grab-rail in an elderly person’s home can help to prevent the falls and broken bones that cost the NHS £2 billion a year. The option of making greater use of technology remains hugely under-exploited, in terms of how we ensure that people are getting a first-rate service at home.

I am sure my colleagues will want to raise the whole issue of rurality this afternoon. Government policies are meant to be rural-proofed. Frankly, social care is far easier to administer in a conurbation such as Plymouth than in other parts of the county, where people are spread over much greater distances.

Another issue that I am sure some of my colleagues will want to talk about is recruitment. We are told that social care will be one of the big growth industries in the future. That is all to the good, and it is inevitable. However, currently, people find it very difficult to recruit. It is much easier, I am told, for the NHS to recruit people to work in social care than it is for the private sector. It is all very well transferring people back home, but only provided that there are the people to carry out the social care.

Stephen Dorrell, a former Health Secretary, has said: “Fetishising the NHS budget and imagining it’s the only public service that relates to health is fundamentally to miss the point...It is not true to say we are supporting the health service by asking it to do social care. We are using the health service as a very expensive social care service and then talking about efficiency. It’s insane economics and very bad social policy.” I would like to know if the Minister agrees, and what he feels can be done to ensure that we have first-class social care in place before we start to close community beds. Given the closure of residential homes, and the fact that local authorities are increasingly unwilling to pay the fees demanded by residential homes, we might end up in a situation where, although a person can no longer be cared for at home and needs some kind of hospital bed—we want to keep them away, of course, from the main hospitals—we have got rid of all our beds, or a disproportionate number, and so have created an unnecessary problem.

I want to say something about NHS Property Services. Since the NHS provider in Devon changed from Northern Devon Healthcare NHS Trust to Royal Devon and Exeter NHS Foundation Trust—at least in my part of the county—on 1 October, ownership of the community
hospitals has transferred to NHS Property Services. NHS Property Services, as we know, charges commercial rents, meaning that many hospitals will have to pay higher rent. Along with the planned bed closures, that has understandably made some of our constituents nervous. What happens if hospitals cannot pay the rent? Given that the Department of Health has committed to meeting any increased property costs for 2017 and 2018, the big question is what happens thereafter.

My general practitioners at the Blackmore health centre in Sidmouth increasingly feel that they have little influence over the redevelopment of the surgery, which I champion, as a result of the involvement of NHS Property Services. The practice wants to buy the building off NHS Property Services, either now or at some stage in future. It is proving extremely difficult to make that happen. It should be a simple move, as it is supported by local GPs and the local community.

There is some concern about Exmouth—Devon’s biggest town—losing its out-of-hours GP services, which will be replaced with use of the 111 service, in line with the new integrated urgent care commissioning standards. Perhaps the Minister could write to me to reassure me that my constituents in Exmouth will receive exactly the same cover that they did under the previous arrangement.

One thing that affects all of us across Devon is the lack of provision of mental health facilities, which has exercised us for a long time. In my patch, I am concerned about St John’s Court, which is the only mental health and recovery facility in Exmouth. Two years ago, Devon Partnership NHS Trust spent £300,000 on a move from Danby Terrace, which was not at the time fit for purpose, to St John’s Court. On top of that, £140,000—this is all taxpayers’ money—was spent on refurbishing St John’s Court. Now the trust is pushing ahead with closing and selling St John’s Court. It has assured us that Exmouth will not experience a reduction in healthcare provision, and that St John’s Court will not be sold until an alternative venue can be found. We are talking about a growing town with a lot of mental health issues, I seek reassurance from the Minister that before anything is closed, something will be put in place to reassure the local community and my constituents that we have the same, if not a better, level of mental ill-health prevention and cure.

I wanted to speak for longer, but I am conscious that my colleagues will probably want to articulate their own slightly different visions for the future of healthcare in Devon. I say to the Minister in the friendliest manner possible that we are a pretty quiet bunch in our part of the world, and we do not seek trouble, but we do fight tenaciously to protect the livelihoods of our constituents. Too often, we feel that people forget about us in the south-west, and that money is diverted to all kinds of infrastructure projects in the huge urban conurbations, the northern powerhouse and so forth. This time, we will speak as one to ensure that whatever comes out of these consultations, and wherever we end up after them, we can argue these points in a mature way. It is simply no good saying, “It’s a lack of money. It’s Tory cuts.” That is an immature conversation to have. We have to, between us, design a health and social care service that is fully integrated, makes use of technology, and cares for all of us as we get older and more dependent. We need to be brave, but political sloganising is not the answer.
clinical commissioning group area was given this special treatment with only two other areas in the country—one in Essex and one in Cumbria. Because of the need to ensure that we do not fall into a future funding black hole, the success regime was implemented. I fully support that because we need this special treatment.

On top of the success regime we have a sustainability and transformation plan, which, as hon. Members will know, is being implemented in all NHS regions in England. We have this two-tier process and my understanding from conversations with NHS England is that the success regime will probably be folded into the sustainability and transformation plan, so North Devon will find itself subject to a target that we are at least more easily able to identify. The difficulty is that the ideas that are starting to emerge from the two, soon to be one, reviews are simply unpalatable for North Devon.

I put it on the record that I am fully aware that these are not firm proposals or ideas and no public consultation has been launched. None the less, what has started to emerge has, reasonably and understandably, created serious concern in the North Devon community because, looking across the piece at the various documents that have emerged from both the success regime and the sustainability and transformation plan, we see a picture that puts under threat some of the services at North Devon district hospital, which my constituents rely on and that puts under threat some of the services at North Devon.

I have here one of the latest documents to emerge, which is about five weeks old, starts by talking about “a two-site option for maternity” and states that the “Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital would most probably be the second site”—after Derriford in Plymouth—“rather than North Devon District Hospital”.

That is a clear indication that consideration is being given to closing the maternity unit at North Devon district hospital. That is not acceptable to my constituents and we will fight any such proposals if they come forward. We will do that forcefully for a couple of reasons.

North Devon is a special case, not least because of our geography. I have said many times in this Chamber, in the House and elsewhere that Devon has been historically underfunded, and North Devon even more so. We are and have been for too long the poor relation in public funding. Let me be clear. This is not something that has happened in the last 18 months or the last six and a half years. It has been an issue under Governments of all colours for many years, if not decades. It is something up with which we will no longer put. Part of the difficulty of singling out North Devon and Barnstaple as a place that can apparently sustain further reductions in services is that we start from a lower base of funding than in many other regions. That feeds perfectly into the point that my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon raised about rurality. North Devon is a largely rural constituency, and for many years a series of funding formulae have dealt unfairly with North Devon because of its rurality. There seems to have been a belief that, because we are a rural area with a sparse population, we can somehow do with less funding. In fact, the opposite is true, and I am delighted that this Government are starting to recognise that. Across the piece of funding for local government, the police, education and health services, we are starting to right that wrong and equalise that funding gap, but the history is still there and that is why North Devon is the last place where we should be looking for further cuts.

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for allowing me to intervene during his limited time in this debate, but I would like to respond specifically to his point about funding and allocations.

In the 2016-17 funding round, the allocation formulae have been looked at again and we have, for the first time in several years, introduced three differentials that are relevant to rural areas and that I think will affect my hon. Friends here. They include looking at the combination of rurality, remoteness and sparsity of population to improve the ambulance emergency cost adjustment, to reflect the greater distances travelled in rural areas; an adjustment to support continued provision by hospitals with 24/7 A&E services that are remote from the wider hospital network—my hon. Friend’s North Devon district hospital will be one of those—and an adjustment to remove from the formula supply-induced demand in urban areas where people live close to hospitals. Those three measures have led to a change and I gently suggest that my hon. Friend may care to look at the CCG allocations table which sets that out. For Northern, Eastern and Western Devon CCG, the per capita allocation for 2016-17 is £1,250, which is slightly above the average for England of £1,221 per head.

Peter Heaton-Jones: I thank the Minister for his intervention and I welcome it, but I say gently to him and NHS England, which I am sure is monitoring this, that all that good work will be entirely undone if we then lose our acute services at North Devon district hospital. This is not about figures on a spreadsheet; it is about the services and healthcare provision that my constituents will receive in Barnstable.

I am aware of the time, Mrs Main, but I want to raise a second issue, which is important and recognisable to us in North Devon, but perhaps not to those beyond: our unique geography and the distances. An Australian historian once referred to the tyranny of distance, and I think we suffer from that in North Devon. If one looks at a map, it is all too easy to think that there is a decent road network between Barnstaple and Exeter. I can give several reasons why that would be a wrong assumption. First, vast numbers of people live in isolated regions far north of Barnstaple. Secondly, the road network is not all it is cracked up to be—although that is a subject for another day and one on which I am fighting heavily.
My main point is that what no map or distance table shows is that in North Devon we have pockets of serious deprivation. In Ilfracombe, I have two of the most deprived wards in the south-west and by some metrics the most deprived in south England. In those areas car ownership is less than 80%. Put another way, one in five households do not have access to their own private transport and, because of the demographics, some of those who do are elderly and perhaps have their own vehicle but simply would not feel comfortable or up to going long distances to Exeter or Plymouth. Those two reasons alone are sufficient to argue strongly that the last place where we should be looking to make cuts to acute services is at North Devon district hospital.

I am aware of the time, Mrs Main, so I will conclude. I welcome the fact that the Government are looking at the funding. I welcome the repeated assurances that local clinicians will make the final decisions. However, I want it to be in no doubt whatever—the community of North Devon are very clear about this—that North Devon is a special case and needs to be treated as such. In that regard, I make no apologies whatever for fighting for North Devon and for appealing for there to be common sense and no cuts at North Devon district hospital.

*Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair):* We have approximately 35 minutes before the winding-up speeches and there are five speakers. I am sure we can do the maths.

3 pm

**Kevin Foster (Torbay) (Con):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) on securing the debate. I will be mindful of your comments about the time. I presume that a maximum of eight minutes will be appropriate.

**Mr Geoffrey Cox (Torridge and West Devon) (Con):**

Seven minutes.

**Kevin Foster:** I am reminded that it is seven minutes. [*Interuption.*] The more heckling there is, the longer I might get.

For me, this debate is prompted by what is one of the greatest successes of the NHS: the fact that life expectancies are rising. In parts of my constituency, life expectancy has reached 90, and in one ward that I represent, Wellwood, 9% of the entire population are aged over 85. That brings challenges not only in health and social care, but in relation to the wider selection of services that those who have reached that age will need in order to have a whole life and not just have their healthcare needs taken into account.

Today, however, the focus is on the health service. Clearly, the proposals announced by South Devon and Torbay clinical commissioning group have created a lot of concern across Torquay, Paignton and the rest of the bay and south Devon. In fact, public concern was so great that the first three consultation meetings that it arranged in Paignton did not go particularly well. It arranged what were obviously going to be very large meetings in rather small venues, so when I attended the first one, at 9 am, I found myself, with about 40 residents, my predecessor, the former mayor and a number of councillors, plus trade union representatives, being told that the room was full and we could not go in. Things got worse at the 4 o’clock meeting. I ended up addressing more people at an impromptu meeting on the steps of the venue than had actually got into the official meeting. Then finally, in the evening, although there was a reserved seat for me, that meant that another resident was turned away because I was there speaking. It was a shambolic start to a serious consultation, but thankfully I notice the trust has now arranged further meetings.

Local concern about Paignton hospital is so great because of the breadth and importance of the services that it provides, not least the beds that many people are discharged to from Totabry hospital. When the Public Accounts Committee did its recent report on delayed discharges, Torbay had one of the best records. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon would reflect that, sadly, the Royal Devon and Exeter did not. That is not so much about the hospital’s own services as about its ability to discharge to a social care setting.

We have already seen the impact that the consultation has had in terms of beds. Qualified staff have decided to seek jobs elsewhere, seeing the numbers of beds already reduced. During the consultation, the fact that there are hundreds of beds in residential and nursing care homes in Paignton was cited. I took the time to ask the obvious question: how many of those are actually vacant at the moment? The answer that I got back—this was a snapshot taken two weeks ago—was that 12 of the beds are vacant, yet two are in places that are accepting new placements at the moment and four are in a place that specialises in caring for children. That causes real concern that we will see more delayed discharges at our local hospital if the proposals for Paignton go ahead.

Many residents of Paignton are concerned about the wider clinical services provided there, not least the minor injuries unit. The suggestion made in the consultation is that if a minor injuries unit closes at Paignton, residents will travel to either Totnes or Newton Abbot. I am sure that we will hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris) that that specialises in caring for children. That causes real concern that we will see more delayed discharges at our local hospital if the proposals for Paignton go ahead.

We have already seen the impact that the consultation document is that although it is very detailed about what will be taken away from the south Devon area, it is not detailed at all about what will replace it. For example, there is talk of a clinical hub in Paignton, but no location. There is talk of doing more through GP surgeries. Yet many of the practices are in buildings that predate 1948 and are in effect converted houses—not places that would be able to provide extended facilities for healthcare.

My other concern about the consultation document is that although it is very detailed about what will be taken away from the south Devon area, it is not detailed at all about what will replace it. For example, there is talk of a clinical hub in Paignton, but no location. There is talk of doing more through GP surgeries. Yet many of the practices are in buildings that predate 1948 and are in effect converted houses—not places that would be able to provide extended facilities for healthcare.

I find it very concerning when I speak with local people about what engagement there will genuinely be as part of the consultation, not least given the meetings arranged for small venues and the way that much of the questioning really produces only one logical answer.
No one is going to say, “Yes, I’d like to spend the night in hospital,” but we would spend the night in hospital if we felt that we needed to be there. This is about ensuring that people have genuinely been able to express their views. That is why I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will take a close look at the consultation being undertaken.

In closing, I emphasise the point that has been made about recruitment. The movement of qualified staff out of Paignton the moment the proposals to close the hospital were mooted speaks to a wider problem of recruitment across health and social care in south Devon. Although seeing the Torbay and South Devon trust receive Fair Train’s gold standard work experience accreditation last Friday was welcome, more still needs to be done to convince people that careers in health and social care are just that: careers. Many male jobseekers in particular see a job in that field as an entry-level job that they would not progress from, yet there are so many opportunities there. This is another concern for me, as it is for colleagues. We can put things down on paper, but if, in the social care market locally, there are not the providers, there is not the quality of provider and, bluntly, the vacancies that we already have for GPs are spreading across other health professions, then whatever position we come up with in the consultation will not be able to be implemented unless we address those long-term challenges in our economy.

Sir Hugo Swire: Does my hon. Friend share my concern about recruitment in social care and care homes: that a lot of staff are, of course, from the Philippines and other countries around the world? We must all hope that that is taken into account when the UK and other countries around the world? We must all concern about recruitment in social care and care homes: that they would not progress from, yet there are so many opportunities there. This is another concern for me, as it is for colleagues. We can put things down on paper, but if, in the social care market locally, there are not the providers, there is not the quality of provider and, bluntly, the vacancies that we already have for GPs are spreading across other health professions, then whatever position we come up with in the consultation will not be able to be implemented unless we address those long-term challenges in our economy.

Kevin Foster: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention. It is worth saying that the outcome of the EU referendum and Brexit is probably not going to affect those from the Philippines, given that the Philippines is not a member, but I fully accept the point that we have for too long relied on importing healthcare professionals—doctors and others. We have to have a debate about whether it is ethical for us basically to be depopulating parts of the third world of much-needed doctors, nurses and other trained medical professionals and to be relying on other countries’ training schemes to provide the numbers of healthcare professionals we need. The key point is that we want our own young people to be taking up those opportunities, as well as having the services provided.

I can see you indicating that my time is coming to an end, Mrs Main, or has come to an end. I will finish with one plea: I want to see Paignton hospital and Paignton people’s services continuing into the future.

3.8 pm

Oliver Colville (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): I, too, congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) on securing the debate. Over the next few moments, I want to concentrate on NHS England’s proposals to close three GP surgeries in my Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport constituency and how I hope we can take some pressure off the principal acute hospital at Derriford in the constituency of my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Plymouth, Moor View (Johnny Mercer). I am told that the reason why NHS England is considering the closures is the size of the GP practices. The Cumberland GP practice has 1,800 patients, Hyde Park 2,800 and St Barnabas 1,700. They are considered by NHS England to be unsustainable and too small. It also tells me that closing those practices is not down to saving money, but to delivering better value for money. However, before I speak about those issues, let me put my constituency in context.

Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport runs from the A38 down to the sea and from the River Plym to the River Tamar. It is the home of one of the largest universities in the country, with more than 27,000 students, thousands of whom live in the city centre, and it is a naval and Royal Marine Commando garrison city, as my hon. Friend the Minister, for whom I was a Parliamentary Private Secretary in a previous life, knows only too well.

The city’s population is growing. Although it has a global reputation for marine science and engineering as well as research, it is a low-wage city. It is one of the country’s poorest constituencies and is an inner-city seat. I do not have a single piece of countryside in my constituency, unless we include the Ponderosa pony sanctuary, which is a rather muddy field. Between Compton and Peverell in the north-east of my constituency and Devonport in the south-west, there is an 11-year life expectancy difference. Compton and Peverell is where many of the university lecturers and hospital consultants live. In the run-up to the 2010 general election, when I won the seat on the third attempt, the Conservative party pledged to do something about healthcare in deprived inner cities.

We have started to make good our word. In 2014, our hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter), one of the Minister’s ministerial predecessors, came to Devonport to open the Cumberland GP practice, which is now under threat. Other facilities on the Cumberland campus include a minor injuries unit, the new Devonport health centre and a pharmacy. The Cumberland GP practice was set up by Plymouth Community Healthcare—now Livewell Southwest—and the Peninsula medical school. There was and is a desperate need to provide a tailor-made alternative service to the existing GP practice—then the Mariborough Street practice; now the Devonport health centre—for this deprived Devonport community, and a need to look after drug users and the city’s homeless in hostels such as the neighbouring Salvation Army’s.

The practice also offers practical placements to students at the Plymouth medical school. Until earlier this year it was funded by Livewell Southwest, a social enterprise, which found it too expensive to maintain. Despite Devonport’s severe deprivation, NHS England did not want to get involved in providing a contract to the Cumberland GP practice, which has consequently been operating without a formal contract and is managed by Access Health Care.

I understand that in the past the neighbouring Devonport health practice has not been interested in offering facilities to homeless people and drug users. Indeed, I understand that some of the Cumberland practice’s patients were not keen to transfer back to the Devonport centre, which is where they came from in the first place.
NHS England’s reason for putting the Cumberland GP practice under threat is because it considers it to be too small and is operating in unsuitable, cramped premises. Unless we are very careful, we could potentially put more pressure on Derriford’s acute emergency unit, which is under enormous pressure. I became aware of NHS England’s proposals for the three GP practices in August, during the summer recess, when no doubt NHS England expected me and other MPs to be away on parliamentary trips or taking a holiday. I immediately put together a series of meetings with the city council’s director of public health, the leader of the council and the cabinet member for adult social care, people from NHS England, the dean of the medical school and Dr Richard Ayres, who runs the Cumberland GP practice.

At the meeting I suggested that the Cumberland GP practice could share Devonport health centre’s brand-new building, which has space and operates as a federation, sharing receptionists and back-room staff. This was supported by everyone present. Indeed, the city council’s health and wellbeing board also supported it following an inquiry that recommended measures to allow the Cumberland GP practice to continue. However, I understand that Devonport healthcare might not be willing to do this, and it appears that the Devonport community may be deprived of a second GP practice and that patients will have no choice in which doctor they can go to.

I have also had representations from patients at both Hyde Park and St Barnabas surgeries. At Hyde Park, although Dr Stephen Warren is keen to continue as a GP following a heart attack, he has transferred the ownership of his practice to Access Health Care, as he no longer wishes to deal with the back-room tasks of administration, which is part of running a practice. He argues that his and his partner’s growing 2,800 practice—the Cumberland is growing as well—has attracted outstanding reviews and he would not be able to inform his patients where he was going if he relocated to another practice. He also thinks that some patients like to have a relationship with an individual doctor who they can see speedily rather than having to wait weeks.

The St Barnabas surgery, which is also run by Access Health Care, was set up in a new development next to a residential care home for the elderly where patients do not have to walk far to get to it. In all three cases, NHS England expected me and other MPs to be away on parliamentary trips or taking a holiday. I immediately put together a series of meetings with the city council’s director of public health, the leader of the council and the cabinet member for adult social care, people from NHS England, the dean of the medical school and Dr Richard Ayres, who runs the Cumberland GP practice.

The real challenge that we face is the speed at which implementation of the changes is being considered. As other hon. Members have said, it makes it almost impossible to put in place the needed care in the community. Of more concern to me is the fact that nowhere have we really addressed the need for a proper strategy for rural healthcare. I have read the five-year plan, and the word “rural” appears three times. I have been frustrated, when I have written to the Minister’s predecessors to ask about a rural strategy, because they have told me that there is one, when the truth is that there is not. There is an urgent need for a proper review of examples from around the world—Australia and New Zealand. There are plenty of examples. Even China has a proper strategy, and other countries think about such things in a very different way. That, to me, is crucial.
The other day I attended a workshop with the Nuffield Trust, the ambulance service and a number of hospital trusts, looking at what is happening and what we need to do. In rural areas things are at crisis point. Care homes are closing and are not being replaced with new ones—at least not in rural areas. They tend to be developed in city areas. The result will be a change in the population mix in rural areas, which will lead to economic deprivation and then social deprivation. We need to accept that rural communities are different. They need to be supported; otherwise, the consequences will not be as simple as whether we lose a hospital. The taxes raised in this country are generated predominantly in the city, but we accept that they should be spent across the country; equally, that is how we should deal with our rural communities.

We should review and amend the funding formula. I am pleased to hear of the changes in allocation which are coming shortly. However, the issue is more fundamental than the funding formula. One of our challenges is the fact that the needs are different in each rural area, but training regimes have become increasingly specialised. There are many individuals who specialise, in a number of different specialisms; the current regime structure requires a certain number of specialists, in each of those specialisms, to get a tick in the box to say that an area is safe. We need more generalists, not more specialists. Several royal colleges are already considering the generalising of training, but we need conversations to happen not just within those royal colleges but between them, and Government should sponsor and support that. We also need to get acceptance within the trusts that recruit the individuals. If they will not accept the new generalists, we shall have a problem.

We need more generalists and we need more geriatricians. We also need to think carefully about how to deliver urgent care. Urgent care and accident and emergency are not entirely the same. Some of the models used in other parts of the world, such as Australia, are very interesting. It is wrong to say that if there cannot be an A & E department the hospital must go. There are many different ways to provide what we need, and we must look at that. We must also review the regulatory criteria. Regulators say, “You need a person with this job description and this expertise and training.” At the moment regulators will not allow an organisation to accept someone with the right skill mix but without the specific tick-the-box qualifications. That needs to change.

As to the care home sector, we clearly need hard measures, but we need soft measures too. The human side of social care is as important as the technical side. A challenge with respect to the agenda for integrating health and social care is to scrutinise the commissioning of social care in the same way as the commissioning of NHS care. At the moment that is not happening. I do not think I am wrong if I say that there is now a bit of a lottery, based on where people live, for how much money is allocated and therefore how good the care is.

My final plea is about the long-term plan. With increasing development and population—whatever happens about immigration—we need to ensure that we plan. At the moment, the NHS is not a statutory consultee in the planning process; and that needs to be rectified.

3.24 pm

Neil Parish (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): It is great to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Main. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) for obtaining this debate, which is very timely.

Consultation should be about consultation. The CCG has presented four options: in option A Tiverton has 32 beds, Seaton 24 and Exmouth 16; in option B Tiverton has 32, Sidmouth 24 and Exmouth 16; in option C Tiverton has 32, Seaton 24 and Exeter 16; and in option D Tiverton has 32, Sidmouth 24 and Exeter 16. There is no sign of Okehampton or Honiton hospitals on the consultation. Beds there are simply said to be closed. Is that consultation? In our original reforms of the health service we said that local people must be consulted. Angela Pedder did exactly the same in Axminster two years ago, as is being done now; she just came and said the beds were to be closed. There were no alternatives or consultation—just “We have made the decision, we know best, and we will overrule anybody who says any different.”

I tell the Minister that that is not consultation; we must make sure that consultation happens. Honiton is a great hospital. It currently has 18 beds and offers midwife-led births, a minor injuries unit, therapies, outpatients, X-ray and GP-allocated primary care services. It has an outstanding reputation and is often referred to locally as the Honiton Hilton, because it provides such great services. People in Honiton have supported it for generations, and that is what is so essential. We have an ageing population in Devon. My constituency starts in Uplyme. My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr Cox) has Great Torrington in his constituency up in the north-west. Lifton is down in one corner of the county, and it goes right up to beyond Ilfracombe. The county is massive, and it is being suggested that community hospitals should be closed. The Royal Devon and Exeter hospital will be under great pressure to keep its acute beds free. Yet we are closing down community hospitals that could ease the pressure on acute hospitals. That seems to be taking things in totally the wrong direction.

I welcomed the Minister’s intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) about the reallocation of funds. Are not the consultations therefore premature? Do they not exclude whole hospitals from being considered at all, and should not that be reviewed? Can the Minister ask for that? The independent health service review looked at the case of Torrington and said that it should not have been closed. As to Axminster, we still do not have a proper facility and we do not know how it will be engaged. Not only are the CCGs taking beds away from community hospitals; they are not putting anything in their place.

I make a plea to the Minister: what are we to do? We have an ageing population; the age profile of Axminster is probably what the whole country’s will be in 2035. Our population is healthy but growing older. We want to help people in their own homes. I am pleased for that to happen, and I think it is right, but we also need community hospitals. Honiton has excellent communications so it is easy to bring people in and out of the hospital, and it is a quick journey from the Royal Devon and Exeter to Honiton hospital if people need to be brought back to relieve the pressure on beds. I cannot
see how it is possible to go forward with a consultation when a hospital is completely taken out. I am sure that the Minister will say that it is up to local people and organisations to decide; but there is a problem if, when a local consultation comes along, a hospital is removed from the list. Also, when it comes to staffing, it does not help in getting staff for a local hospital if that hospital is threatened with closure.

I really feel that all our MPs across the whole of Devon need to unite, because over the last two years the number of beds in our community hospitals has been halved. I rather fear that we will be standing here in two years’ time saying that they have been halved again. Rather than fighting between each other over which hospitals are kept open and which are closed, let us fight all the closures across Devon. Otherwise we are just being picked off one by one, Minister, and this is precisely the fight all the closures across Devon. We need to unite, because over the last two years the number of beds in our community hospitals has been halved. I rather fear that we will be standing here in two years’ time saying that they have been halved again.

A general hospital generally requires something around a third of a million people to sustain it. The population of northern Devon, including Torridge and the hospital’s catchment area, is some 80,000 or 90,000 people short of the figure that generally sustains a general hospital. However, historically, it has been universally accepted that Barnstaple requires a general hospital. We cannot provide health services to the population of northern Devon unless we have an acute hospital in Barnstaple. We are therefore faced with a choice: either make a special case for funding it in the way that a rural hospital that otherwise could not survive needs to be funded, and make it an exception to the principles that apply to general hospitals for which the population is sufficient; or see it slowly wither on the vine, dying by a thousand cuts, and by weasel words used by clever civil servants and others to justify one saving after another. Those savings really mean services reduced, and patients redirected over 40, 50, 60 or 80 miles away, with some expected to travel into the heart of Somerset for treatment that other residents enjoy on their doorstep.

I endorse what my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) said; there are red lines for Devon’s Members of Parliament. Of course we accept that the current model of healthcare cannot be preserved in aspic. There must be change and transformation, but we cannot put accountants’ methodology over the interests of patients and the citizens we represent.

I say to my hon. Friend the Minister that I know the green and pleasant lands of Shropshire well. What a fine county it is. It, too, has had its battles on this score; I know, because I have family who live there. Let him come to Devon and see the wide distances. I do not believe that in Shropshire there is a place over 70 miles from a main conurbation, as many communities in my constituency are. Travelling 70 miles to, say, have a child delivered puts at risk and prejudices the interests of those who are to be treated.

A decision must be made on health services in north Devon. It is the same with hospitals in the far north of Scotland; they are highly rural, deeply isolated and not sustainable unless a special formula and a special approach are taken. Words such as “care closer to home” are all well and fine, but the difficulty is that communities see an historic legacy of underfunding that has left the health authorities in our area with an £80 million annual deficit. That deficit has built up over decades of accounting measures, and of conjuring with accounts. On the one hand, communities see this vast deficit, and on the other, they hear words such as “care closer to the community,” or, “Cut your beds and we will provide you with a service that is just as good, and that better fulfils the needs of patients.” Of course we can listen to the logic and rationality of that argument, but while it is all the time moved by the spectre of deficit, they will suspect that it is being made for one reason only: to reduce the budget.

My plea is for fairness. It is a plea to be heard, made on behalf of a neglected, extraordinarily rural area—possibly one of the most rural in England. It is a plea for a special look at this problem in northern, eastern and western Devon. The language coming from well-meaning and, I accept, wholly sincere health administrators has an Orwellian flavour to it while it is governed by this shadow of deficit that hangs over it.

I welcome the news from my hon. Friend the Minister that there has been allowance for rurality in the 2016-17 budget, but one or two minor tweaks do not reverse the legacy of decades. The truth is that the health services we represent—of the people we represent—are being seen to perpetrate a grave injustice. For example, public health spending alone—spending on the prevention of ill health—in the county of Devon is less than half the national average. On any analysis, the funding we receive in Devon is wholly inadequate to deal with its wide disparities and distances, its ageing population, and the other factors that affect Devon.

My simple plea to the Minister today is to hear the voice of those whom we represent, and to hear them pleading with him. Until the deficit is addressed and there is fair funding for rural health services, we will not believe the assurances from well-meaning administrators that our health services are safe. They are not safe. We need a major amendment to the rural health funding formula; we need to improve on what has been done this year; and we need to assuage the anxieties of our constituents by a proper, demonstrably fair health funding formula.
limited to this region; I believe they are systemic. Demand for NHS services is increasing nationally faster than ever before, fuelled in part by an increase in social deprivation and an ageing population. The need to address the increased demand, together with the need to keep pace with new technologies, is placing hitherto unseen financial pressures on NHS providers.

There are 280,000 people in Devon living with one or more long-term conditions, such as asthma, diabetes, hypertension and cancer; 150,000 people have a mental illness; and there are 40,000 people with cancer who need rapid access to high-quality services. Alongside that increased demand, there have been cuts to adult social care, and to public health and prevention budgets. If we are just to stand still, funding needs to be increased by an extra 2.6% above inflation. I am interested to see whether the Minister’s promised extra funding matches that; I doubt that it will. If no changes are made by 2020, the NHS in Devon will face a deficit in excess of £440 million.

In 2015, the Northern, Eastern and Western Devon success regime was introduced by Simon Stevens, the chief executive of NHS England, in an attempt to address the rising deficit and the failure to meet important health targets, including cancer waiting times. There is no doubt, as I am sure hon. Members agree, that there is a compelling case for change. Change is desirable; it would indeed be better for care to be more patient-centred, and of course it would be better to have more care needs met in the community. It is also true that the majority of patients receiving end-of-life care would prefer to die at home.

But, and it is a big “but”, change on this scale—massive, transformational change—needs leadership, transparency, a whole system change and, above all, investment. Making changes of this order—closing community hospitals with no proven plan for care in place—is downright reckless. That is why so many GPs in Devon are opposing the proposals, and have stated that they have “grave concerns over patient safety.”

They say:

“We are concerned that the untried, untested closures of so many community hospital beds in this area could prove dangerous for a significant population of patients who might need to rely on community beds”.

The well-respected Chair of the Health Committee, the hon. Member for Totnes, has declared that she also cannot support the plans without an assurance that services will improve as a result of the changes.

People the length and breadth of Devon have expressed their concerns. The very active women’s institute in Devon has raised objections, as have communities across Devon. As we have heard from Members today, the consultation process has been woefully inadequate; there have been undersized rooms, and an online consultation. Frankly, it is not good enough.

Everybody is right to be worried. Only last week, the Care Quality Commission published its report, entitled “The state of health care and adult social care in England”. The report states that “the sustainability of adult social care is approaching a tipping point”.

In addition to the financial pressures, the sector is also experiencing massive problems with recruitment and retention of staff. The people of Devon are being asked to place their trust in a system that is on already on the brink and, quite understandably, they are not going to—and nor should they.

Local GPs have described the proposals as a “hasty cost improvement process”. This is the crux of the matter: the proposals as they stand, without adequate funding for alternative care, will save money, but they will not improve patient care, and may even compromise patient safety. I agree with the right hon. Member for East Devon that the cart is being put before the horse; that absolutely hits the nail on the head. Local NHS trusts in Devon are on their knees, desperately crying out for more funding to enable them to plan for the increased demand and changing needs of the population in the 21st century. This is not just about extra funding, but about making the kind of transformational change that is needed to deliver high-quality, excellent healthcare in the 21st century. It needs proper planning and proper systems in place, and that cannot be achieved on the cheap.

I am shocked that in this context, the Prime Minister is refusing to give the health and social care sectors the funding, which they desperately need. We have one of the lowest percentages of health and social care funding, as a proportion of our GDP, in the entire region of Europe. That cannot be right. I urge the Minister to use whatever influence he has with the Prime Minister to get her to revisit this issue, for the sake of the people of Devon, and for people across the country.

This situation is not unique to Devon; we face many of the same problems in my region of Lancashire and, as I know from my work with the Health Committee, across the country.

I also ask that the consultation process be firmed up, and that people be offered a full, transparent and real consultation, rather than lip service being paid to having one. During Health questions the other day, the Under-Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Warrington South (David Mowat), promised to visit Devon and to listen at first hand to stakeholders. I urge this Minister to take that away with him, and to look at making sure that the Government listen properly to the voices of Devon and the very legitimate concerns being raised in this debate. No one is trying to say that change is not needed, but one system cannot be taken away until there is a fully proven plan in place.

Mrs Anne Main (in the Chair): I call the Minister. If possible, could you leave a minute or two at the end for the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) to respond, Minister?

3.45 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): I am grateful to you for taking the Chair this afternoon, Mrs Main, and for encouraging me to leave some time for my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) to respond, which I will endeavour to do. I congratulate him not only on securing this debate, which has been very well supported by his colleagues from across the county, but if I may—this is the first opportunity for me to do so publicly—on the recognition that he received of his time in Government from the previous Prime Minister.
I start by highlighting some of the excellent work carried out every day by all those who work in the NHS, not only in my right hon. Friend’s constituency but in mine and those of all the others who have spoken today. I will attempt to address some of the specific points that have been raised, particularly by my right hon. Friend. Friend, but I shall first provide the House with a little context and background regarding health services in Devon.

Devon is a leader in many areas of the health service—perhaps to the surprise of some hon. Members who have spoken—relative to other parts of the country. Not least, the Torbay and South Devon NHS Foundation Trust was the first trust in England to join up hospital and community care with social care. A plea to do that was made by my right hon. Friend and it is already happening in South Devon. The trust operates as a single organisation, working with partners to improve the way it delivers safe, high-quality health and social care. The trust is showcasing exactly the kind of joined-up, patient-centred care that we want the NHS to provide to meet the needs of the ageing population.

I also pay tribute to the staff at the Royal Devon and Exeter NHS Foundation Trust, who last month celebrated their fifth anniversary since the last incident of hospital-acquired MRSA. That remarkable accomplishment comes as the result of continuous improvements at the trust over the last 10 years. The trust is now considered a national leader in infection control, being the only general hospital in the whole of England to have avoided any MRSA infections in the last five years.

However, I absolutely recognise that the region is facing difficulties. NHS staff across the region are working hard to provide good care to patients, but services are not keeping pace with the changing needs of local people. It is becoming increasingly difficult to make sure that local people have access to consistently high-quality care that is affordable and sustainable.

As my right hon. Friend said, in June 2015, NHS England announced that north, east and west Devon would be one of the three areas in the country to take part in a success regime. That is designed to improve health and care services for patients in local health and care systems that are struggling with financial or quality problems. Following intense diagnostic work, the north, east and west Devon success regime published, in February this year, the “Case for Change” report, which was referred to earlier. The report sets out the underlying challenges facing the area and the opportunities to improve access to services and ensure clinical and financial stability. The work concluded that if nothing was done, Northern, Eastern and Western Devon would have a system deficit of £398 million by 2020/21, as has been referenced by a couple of hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper).

As well as the financial challenge, the work identified significant health inequalities and some clinical services that will be unsustainable in their current form. There are good reasons for that. As we have heard from hon. Members in north, east and west Devon, people are living longer successfully, particularly in areas of the constituency of my right hon. Friend. Friend the Member for East Devon and in Torbay.

People are living with increasingly complex care needs and require more support from health and social care services. More than one in five people in north, east and west Devon are over the age of 65, and that figure will be almost one in four by 2021. Some 40% of local people use almost 80% of health and social care services. There are 280,000 local people, including 13,000 children, living with one or more long-term conditions such as asthma, diabetes, hypertension, cancer and mental illness.

Although Devon is regarded from the outside as generally affluent, we are all aware—hon. Members have explained this—that there are areas of significant deprivation. There are big differences in health outcomes between some areas, particularly in Plymouth. There are also spending disparities between different parts of the county.

More than 10% less for each person is spent on healthcare in west Devon compared with north and east Devon, even when age and deprivation is taken into account, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) emphasised. Somebody living in Ilfracombe Central is statistically likely to die almost 15 years earlier than a person living a two-hour drive away in Newton Poppleford.

Inequalities need to be reduced, and the spread of health and social care across north, east and west Devon needs to be made more equal. I refer to what my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon agrees with that. He referred to the success regime consultation as being at fault. I gently remind him that it was only published on 7 October. I am sure that comments made today about the lack of available paper copies of the consultation will be taken into account by the organisers, and that we can respond to that.

Neil Parish: I want to press the Minister on the success regime’s consultation. Is it right for a hospital to have its beds taken away as part of that consultation? Surely a consultation should be for people to have a say on a public decision.

Mr Dunne: I heard my hon. Friend’s concern. Reference of Okehampton or Honiton. I gently draw attention to the fact that the option to retain community beds in both those hospitals was considered as part of the 15 options in the document. The option was rejected as one of the four recommended for consultation, but that does not prevent him, his constituents or local representatives in those areas from putting those alternative options forward.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon asked whether there was a “none of the above” option. I think he may have been referring to page 42 of the consultation document, on which the organisers say that they “welcome all views and will carefully consider all responses and analyse these against the decision making criteria. That will include options which are not currently in the consultation document”.

They are open for proposals to be made by others, but those need to be looked at in the context of the criteria.

Sir Hugo Swire: I am grateful for that clarification. Presumably, that does not alter the fact that Tiverton—that rather expensive private finance initiative that we have inherited—stays part of any outcome.
Mr Dunne: My right hon. Friend would not expect me to be drawn on any of the specific options. I would not want to be seen to be influencing the consultation prematurely or, indeed, at all until we see the recommendations that come out of it.

It has come out of the investigations leading up to the consultation that every day more than 500 people in north, east and west Devon are being cared for in a hospital bed who do not need to be there. That is at the heart of the challenge that we face not just in Devon but across the country, as the hon. Member for Burnley mentioned.

The system is keeping people in community beds or acute beds longer than they need to be because of discharge challenges. That gets back to the initial remarks of my right hon. Friend, Friend for East Devon about whether we are integrating the consultation properly with improvements to social care. It is important, when we come to look at the recommendations arising from the consultation, that we take into account the capacity that will need to be created in social care to provide alternative models of care if the number of beds is reduced.

The formal consultation concludes on 6 January. As I have said, I will not comment on specifics while that is under way, but I strongly encourage my right hon. Friend, all other hon. Members who have spoken in the debate, and those who were not able to because they are elsewhere in the House today to ensure that their views are taken into account. The next phase of the success regime will look at how services are provided in acute hospital settings, as my hon. Friend for North Devon highlighted, as did my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr Cox) in his characteristically robust contribution. I am sure that they will make their views known in the consultation that we anticipate will follow next summer, and the clinicians involved with the acute services will be preparing their recommendations.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon is aware that the success regime plans are part of a broader sustainability and transformation plan that covers the whole of Devon. That creates the opportunity for health and local authorities—not just NHS bodies but local authorities with responsibility for social care—to work together to try to formulate plans that give care packages the kind of integration and coherence that hon. Members have sought for Devon. It will build on the work that has been done by north, east and west Devon’s success regime and on the “Case for Change” published by South Devon and Torbay CCG in September. The latest iteration of the plan is due to be submitted to NHS England this Friday.

Before I conclude, I can confirm that I will write to my right hon. Friend on the Exmouth out-of-hours service. I understand that he has a meeting with the Minister responsible for NHS property services later this month, so he will be able to take up his concerns then. On other challenges that were mentioned, we recognise that there is pressure on recruitment and retention of clinicians in rural areas. Hon. Members will be aware of the announcement made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to try to recruit 25% more doctors over the next few years; of our plans to recruit up to 10,000 more nurses over this Parliament; and of the announcement, last week, that we will be introducing a new category of nursing associate to provide more capability. We are acutely aware of those needs.

It is the responsibility of local NHS organisations to determine how local services are delivered. Hon. Members have made some important points, and I urge them to do so as part of the consultation. I hope that we will have another opportunity to discuss the forthcoming recommendations.

Sir Hugo Swire: I am grateful for an interesting and mature debate. The Minister has a formidable job of trying to reconcile the competing demands across the country, to say nothing of the competing demands across God’s own county of Devon. I can think of no better man to attempt to do that. If the consultation is a genuine opportunity, and is not an excuse to reduce levels of care, the Minister will find us supportive. He will find us supportive if, as I suspect, the consultation is an opportunity to deliver a fully integrated hospital, and a community care and social care system, that is fit for the 21st century.

I am pleased to remember a conversation I had with the Secretary of State, who repeated his commitment to community hospitals. I leave the Minister with one thought: as the previous Prime Minister freely admitted, it was the Conservative party in the south-west that delivered a victory at the last general election. The Minister has seen how formidable we can be when we come together, and come together we will to protect our vital services for our constituents across the county of Devon.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
Environmental Protection

Mr Philip Hollobone in the Chair

4 pm

Mrs Madeleine Moon (Bridgend) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered policies, strategies and funding for environmental protection.

Like many MPs, I have a constituency with a large number of local nature reserves, special areas of conservation and two national nature reserves, one of which, Kenfig, is also a special area of conservation under the EU habitats directive, the Bridgend biodiversity action plan and the UK biodiversity action plan. It is a site of local, Welsh and European nature conservation importance. I have secured this debate to ask questions on the future protection of these sites and others like them across the UK, which urgently needs addressing following the Brexit decision.

I begin by recognising the excellent work of members of the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Environmental Audit Committee and by acknowledging their lead in this field. The EAC’s report on UK and EU environmental policy should have been compulsory reading before voting in the Brexit referendum. We need answers to questions such as whether we have the technical, financial and legal expertise and capacity to respond to the environmental challenge of Brexit. The Wildlife Trusts, including my local Glamorgan wildlife trust, have said:

“The EU has the single largest body of environmental legislation in the world.”

The EU has had an exceptionally positive impact on our efforts to produce policy, influence development and safeguard our wildlife.

One conclusion of the EAC’s report is that “the UK’s membership of the EU has improved the UK’s approach to environmental protection and ensured that the UK environment has been better protected.”

Many witnesses implied that if the UK were free to set its own environmental standards, it would set them at a less stringent level than has been imposed by the European Union.

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): My constituency contains the Newport wetlands, the Gwent levels, the River Usk and more. We should acknowledge that the Welsh Government have taken a great lead on environmental legislation in the UK. However, they can only do so much. Does my hon. Friend agree that, as with the Brexit negotiations generally, it is crucial that the Government work closely with the Welsh Administration in Cardiff for the good of the environment in Wales?

Mrs Moon: I intend to address that later in my speech, but it is a central part of the way forward as we find our way through the tangle that is Brexit.

The UK imposing less stringent levels of environmental protection was a major concern for the people who approached me to initiate this debate. I was asked how confident we could be that nature conservation would be protected and a priority post-Brexit. Lest we forget, in the biodiversity intactness index, which assesses how damaged nature is across the world, the UK is ranked 189th out of 218 countries—we are not exactly doing well at the moment. France and Germany are miles ahead of us because we have been less vigilant in implementing EU environmental legislation. It is clear that there was little thinking about what would happen if the UK voted to leave the EU and what the decision would mean for this policy area.

It is difficult to draw a clear conclusion until we know the terms of our exit, but it is vital that we have an assurance today that EU environmental legislation will be maintained in its entirety so that we have a semblance of stability and breathing space while we develop our own mechanisms and expertise. There are concerns that a full transfer post-Brexit may not be practical, that much of the transfer of directives might be done with little scrutiny through secondary legislation and that this may lead to the weakening of directives. I hope that the Minister, when she arrives, can tell me how she will ensure that that does not happen.

We need to know how we will update legislation and ensure progress. We need a commitment from the Minister that, as an absolute minimum, existing levels of protection for species, habitats and the wider environment will be maintained, and will not be weakened in the longer term through our inability to update legislation or through a lack of enforcement controls.

Richard Benwell of the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust reminded me that:

“EU law is not some static monolith with commandments set in stone, it is an evolving regime brought to life by shared objectives and the rulings of the European courts. Without the trajectory provided by the Commission and the accountability provided by the courts, there is a risk that EU legislation becomes out-dated and unenforced, a kind of ‘zombie legislation.’”

I hope that the Minister will be able to tell me how we are going to enforce legislation. The EU’s mechanisms of oversight, accountability and enforcement ensure that robust implementation and monitoring take place. What will be the legal recourse for those concerned about the loss of important habitats and species? Judicial review is costly and out of the reach of most citizens and non-governmental organisations. Brexit means that we will lose two key accountability mechanisms: the European Court of Justice and the European Commission. What will we replace them with? What will fill that vacuum? We need a commitment that any future changes to this legislation will be subject to robust scrutiny and debate, with provisions for legal challenge to ensure that there is no attempt to roll back environmental protection.

How are we going to fulfil our international obligations? Brexit will not change our obligations such as those under the Bern, Rio and Ramsar conventions, yet once we leave the EU we will not have the support that membership offers in relation to those agreements. How will we meet them? How will we avoid fragmentation in the UK? What plans does the Minister have to quickly develop common values with the devolved Administrations, which my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) mentioned? Much of our environmental policy is entirely devolved. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds argues that transferring EU legislation will require changes to the Scotland Act 1998. We need to know whether the Minister is prepared for that.
Where will the needed capacity and technical and scientific skills come from? The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee has noted:

“The Department’s...resource spend over the last Parliament includes cuts of £254 million...Defra’s main resource budget will reduce in 2015-16 by £135 million, or by 7%.”

The 2015 spending review announced that that budget will be reduced by a further 15% over the next few years. The Minister needs to tell us how we are going to replace the range of technical and scientific capacity and skills that will be lost when EU expertise is no longer accessible. Will any of the promised battle bus money come to DEFRA?

Local authorities are at the forefront of environmental protection, given their key role in deciding planning applications. Research commissioned in 2012 by DEFRA established that good outcomes for biodiversity are most likely to be obtained when expert ecological advice is available to the local planning authority.

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): As the hon. Lady may be aware, I have joined a big campaign for the future of hedgehogs, numbers of which have unfortunately declined by about 50% over the last 15 years. It would be useful if local authorities had policies to ensure that they have hedgehog superhighways.

Mrs Moon: I will come to that eventually, if the hon. Gentleman gives me a little time.

I was discussing making expert ecological advice available to local planning authorities to enable them to develop sufficient ecological information and understand it when considering planning applications. Local authority ecologists currently play a vital part in the process, helping to guide developers towards sustainable solutions that enable development and protect our most valuable natural assets. In the post-Brexit environment, how well equipped will local authorities be to provide expert advice on the natural environment? Not terribly well, particularly given the dire situation that has developed over the past few years.

The Association of Local Government Ecologists, aptly called ALGE, found as far back as 2011 that only 35% of local authorities in England employed an ecologist; perhaps that is why we do not have hedgehog superhighways. ALGE’s conclusion was that “local government’s capacity to assist in the delivery of a wide range of biodiversity initiatives”, such as hedgehog superhighways, “is already limited and is being further eroded”.

ALGE sounded a warning bell, pessimistically concluding that if the capacity of local authorities was in such a state in 2011, the unrelenting pressure on local government budgets would not give the situation any chance to improve.

Local environmental audits are essential if planners are to know how to manage favourable conservation status legislation, which was designed to protect at-risk species such as great crested newts and bats. Environmental audits are essential. If we do not understand the local populations of such species, it can result in overcompensation in planning decision making. Will environmental impact assessments become irrelevant if we do not adapt and update them, as would happen if we were in the EU?

Does the Minister know how many local planning authorities now have access to their own ecological expertise? Are the Government able to review whether capacity is currently adequate and consider what improvements within the system might be achieved if more LPAs had access to their own expertise? How much more effectively could the Government aims and objectives set out in the 2011 natural environment White Paper “The natural choice” be achieved with just a modest increase in ecological resources within local government? I hope that the Minister will assure us that DEFRA’s proposed new 25-year environmental plan will give true recognition and resources to support the important role that local authorities can play within this vital new initiative.

We need to know who will be responsible for dealing with legislation, regulations and concerns raised by industrial chemicals and pesticides. At present, we follow EU-wide regulations that protect human health and the environment from dangerous chemicals. The vast majority of our expertise in chemicals and pesticides is based in the EU. Can we replace it? Can we afford to? We are already facing a scientific brain drain thanks to Brexit. Does the Minister have a plan to recruit the skills, expertise and competencies that her Department needs?

In February 2013, the Government published the UK national action plan for pesticide use, to fulfill a requirement under the EU directive on the sustainable use of pesticides. It is another example of the UK’s half-hearted response to environmental legislation. Buglife stated:

“The plan lacks ambition and fails to set out a clear direction for achieving sustainable use of pesticides and preventing damage to pollinator populations.”

Who cares? We all do; we all must. Wild pollinators in the UK include 250 species of bumblebees and other bees, 2,600 species of butterflies and moths, and 7,010 species of flies and various other insects such as beetles, wasps and thrips. Some 84% of crops and 80% of wild flowers rely on pollinators; they are worth a minimum of £430 million a year to the UK economy. How will we influence EU pollination action plans? In the 2016 national pollinator strategy, the Government promised £691 million for agriculture to support the plan. When will the funding start, and how long will it last?

What will we do about invasive species? Currently, we deal with them at EU level. We often work with Ireland in adding new species to the list; how will we move that forward? How will we comply with ESTA, the European seed treatment assurance scheme? To quote the industry:

“Any serious incident in an individual member state could again lead to product withdrawal. In addition, there is a need to ensure free movement of treated seed across the Community unhampered by individual Member state legislation.”

After Brexit, it will not be possible for the UK to develop UK-only seeds. On fisheries, we might be able to set quotas, but we will not be able to influence EU quotas. Does the Minister know what British waters will consist of? Will it be 12 or 200 miles? How will we ensure that stocks are not put under pressure?

Non-governmental organisations and their volunteers already plug major gaps. An estimated 7.5 million hours are given to species monitoring each year. NGOs are reporting being approached by local government to take over responsibility for managing local nature reserves and even national nature reserves. NGOs currently employ
much of the UK’s environmental and scientific expertise. Will the Minister pledge to work with those NGOs in agreeing a way forward?

Why is any of this important? The “State of Nature” report findings show that in the UK alone, 10% of species are at risk of extinction and nearly 60% have declined since 1970. We face increasing problems of air and water pollution. The focus in the Brexit debate to date has been on the economy. Whatever “Brexit means Brexit” means, it does not mean habitat and species loss, more air, chemical pesticide and water pollution or more invasive species. Does the Minister have a plan, and when will she share it with us?

Finally, I have been asked to make a personal plea from Mr Stanley Johnson, one of the authors of the EU habitats directive. He is especially keen on continued UK participation in the Natura 2000 network of protected areas. I agree totally, and I hope that the Minister will include that in whatever plans she outlines to us in her response.

4.18 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):

I agree with the hon. Member for Bridgend (Mrs Moon) and to the House for my discourtesy in arriving late. Unfortunately, something happened en route. I will send my apologies personally.

Mrs Moon: I know the Minister well. There is no way that she would ever have been late unless there had been a personal or departmental crisis. We understand fully.

Dr Coffey: I thank the hon. Lady for those kind words. She has chosen an exceptionally important topic for discussion. I am grateful to her for sharing some of the themes of her speech in advance, so that we can give her as comprehensive an answer as possible. A lot of this is still in formulation, but I am conscious that the questions and issues that she raised will be absolutely central to some of the answers that we hope to find as we develop our route out of the European Union.

I hope that she will continue to take an interest in this topic over the next few years. On our exit from the European Union, she asked how European legislation would be transferred into national legislation, and what the implications were for nature conservation. She also asked specific detailed questions.

I reiterate from the outset our absolute commitment to delivering on our manifesto promise to be the first generation to leave the environment in a better state than we found it. Even before the EU referendum, work had started on developing our 25-year environment plan to deliver against that target, building on our 2011 natural environment White Paper.

I fully recognise the importance of devolved policy in this area, and as the hon. Lady represents a Welsh constituency, I cannot be entirely specific about the situation directly affecting her constituents. Instead, I will develop more broadly the argument about the UK Government’s role in leading the work to exit the European Union; I will also refer to some of our plans in England.

We have been able to increase spending in the past five years, and any decisions we make in the future to increase expenditure will result in changes that the Welsh Government will be able to take advantage of to continue to enhance the wonderful environment across our country.

Understandably, the decision to leave the European Union has raised questions about what might change, and what leaving might mean for the environment. The Government are well aware of the desire for certainty about what Brexit means for our environmental policy and legislative framework. The Prime Minister recently announced our plans for the great repeal Bill, which will not repeal all the protections given to the environment over many years—there are protections that predate our joining the EU, by the way—but will repeal the European Communities Act 1972. The Bill will be specifically about how we take European law into British law—whether that is Scots law, English and Welsh law, or the legislative framework for Northern Ireland—and will ensure that, the day after we leave, we still have an enforceable legislative framework, and that the environmental protections that we take for granted will continue.

Without prejudging our future relationship with the EU or future decisions of Parliament, I want to provide as much certainty as possible about the fact that we expect existing laws to be applicable. A smooth and orderly exit is in the interests of both the UK and our EU partners. There are decades of EU law to consider, and about a quarter of EU legislation affecting the United Kingdom affects the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. We want to ensure that the statute book works on exit, and that we provide the maximum possible stability. We will engage widely, including with Parliament and the devolved Administrations, on the plan to ensure that when EU law ceases to apply, it is converted into domestic law. All Departments are reviewing the EU laws that apply in their policy areas and how withdrawal from the EU will affect their operation. Some elements of EU law are directives, which have to be transposed into UK law, and others are regulations. We need to ensure that no gaps are left.

I stress the considerable technical expertise to which all devolved Administrations have access. The Joint Nature Conservation Committee advises the UK on nature conservation, and the Health and Safety Executive advises on pesticides and chemicals; I see both organisations playing an important role, especially in regard to the hon. Lady’s concern about keeping the integrity of the United Kingdom. While we may be leaving the European Union, we are keeping the United Kingdom, and we know that the environment does not stop at the border.

As the Prime Minister has signalled, we will no longer be subject to the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice. It will be the role of Parliament to hold the Government to account, along with mechanisms such as judicial review, though I recognise that that is costly, as the hon. Lady said. Understandably, people talk about the role of the European Commission and the ECJ, but their procedures still require people to initiate them. There are non-governmental organisations that are certainly not shy about taking the Government to court on certain matters, but at the moment, they can also use the avenue of the European Commission to do that.

The decision to leave the EU means that we have quite an exciting opportunity to design a set of environmental policies linked to the UK’s needs in the context of the UK’s 25-year environment plan. The hon. Lady and I were both remain campaigners and voters, but leaving the European Union will allow us, in due course, to consider...
whether the prescriptive nature of some of the current directives is the best way to achieve the outcomes we want. A phrase I often use nowadays is “cling to nurse for fear of worse”. Sometimes it felt as if that was the theme on which the remain campaign was based, but the phrase also sums up how people have clung to directives instead of thinking beyond them, saying, “We know that there are directives that are no longer fit for purpose, but there is no appetite to change them.” We want to ensure that any changes in the law are subject to appropriate scrutiny and debate.

The hon. Lady raised a number of detailed points about matters that are still being worked through. It would not be right for me to provide a running commentary, because there is no commentary; the options are still being worked through. She referred to the UK’s international commitments. A lot of European legislation is arrived at by multilateral agreements to which we have already signed up. We will certainly continue to honour our multilateral environmental agreements, which have been reached as a result of global action on environmental protection. We will continue to work closely with our European and international partners to improve the environment.

I stress that this area is a shared competence. Take plastic bags; the Welsh were the first to take action, and England eventually followed. That issue was being discussed just yesterday at the European Council in Luxembourg, and I was able to say, “The United Kingdom has already taken unilateral action on this, and other countries can do that if they wish—they do not need to wait for the EU to legislate on it.” Well done, Wales, for showing the way.

Marine conservation zones are another example. We have created our own designations, so we do not entirely need to rely on Natura 2000 and other elements. Some of those sites are already in place anyway because of international agreements, but we need to work through the designation framework for sites of special scientific interest and areas of outstanding national beauty. Our recently launched national parks plan is a good example of good practice: it continues to outline and enhance the protections we will have, as well as encouraging children to connect with nature.

We have all sorts of unilateral initiatives; I am sure the hon. Lady will welcome, and will contribute to, our consultation on banning the sale and manufacture of personal care and cosmetic products with microbeads. We recognise her point about the “State of Nature” report, and we want to ensure that the environment will be at the heart of any future replacement we design for the common agricultural policy. As she says, there has been a decline in species; we are determined to restore them. We have certainly seen some changes over recent decades, and we need to address them now. As I say, the environment plan and the framework, which I really hope will be published soon, will be a good opportunity to contribute to how we deliver that. I recognise that the environment plan is for England, but I am sure that other nations of our United Kingdom may wish to consider it.

Mrs Moon: It is joined together.

Dr Coffey: The hon. Lady asks whether it is joined. I am sure that we will not be violently misaligned, but as I said at the start, this is a devolved matter, so we cannot dictate our policy to Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland, though I am sure that they will watch our plans with interest.

The hon. Lady raised the issue of invasive non-native species. The UK has long been the leading player on that issue within the European Union. The recent EU regulation was based heavily on our strategy for this country, which in turn is based on international principles acknowledged by the convention on biological diversity. We are committed to continuing that approach.

On funding via the national pollinator programme, the countryside stewardship agreements in the pipeline are now guaranteed. The Chancellor has also stated that new rural development programme projects signed after the statement will be funded, as long as they are good value for money. On local planning authorities, I take the hon. Lady’s point that only about a third of councils employed an ecologist. People can buy in the resource, and they do, but I recognise her point.

Oliver Colvile: Will the Minister give way?

Dr Coffey: I do not have time, I am afraid.

The hon. Member for Bridgend will also want to know about trialling a more strategic approach to great crested newts in Woking, which should result in an overall net benefit to the population and to planning restrictions. I will write to her about the fisheries policy. In conclusion, I appreciate her patience, and assure her that we will continue to engage with the public and stakeholders.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
Type 26 Frigates: Clyde

4.30 pm

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): Before we move on to the important topic of Type 22 frigates on the Clyde, will Members who do not wish to attend the debate please leave quickly and quietly?

Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the timetable for building Type 26 frigates on the Clyde.

It is always a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hollobone, but for the record this debate is on Type 26 frigates.

Talk of defence platforms can often be a dry business, and it passes by most people in this House, never mind among the public. That is not true of the Type 26. The interest we see among Members today in the global combat ship reflects not only its strategic utility and world-class design; the farrago of delays and under-investment in the project and broken promises from the Ministry of Defence reveal the malaise at the heart of the United Kingdom’s strategic thinking, which sees preserving the shop window as more important than its most basic of roles: defending this political state adequately.

I would like the Minister to address with utmost sincerity—something that her Department has been unable to do up to this point—two principal points on the Type 26 project. First, in delaying the start of the project, the Minister and her Department are doing enormous damage to the defence of Scotland and the United Kingdom, which, as I mentioned, is one of the Government’s most solemn and fundamental tasks. Secondly, the failure to cut steel on the vessels, alongside an ongoing refusal to fulfil the promise of a frigate factory on the Clyde, is placing enormous pressure on the complex warship-building capacity that Government have unequivocally promised to protect, causing undeniable financial harm and insecurity to the thousands of skilled and dedicated workers from along the Clyde who are feeling increasingly let down.

In short, behind the broken promises and procrastination, the MOD has proven beyond doubt one maxim put forward by myself and Scottish National party colleagues time and again: every penny spent on the abomination that is Trident is a penny less spent on conventional defence.

In beginning to pick apart the sorry saga of the Type 26, one has to start somewhere, and I choose to start with the Royal Navy taskforce that sailed to recapture the Falkland Islands in 1982. That taskforce was composed of some 23 frigates and destroyers; today, the entire Royal Navy boasts only 19 frigates and destroyers, of which all are based between Her Majesty’s Naval Base Portsmouth and Her Majesty’s Naval Base Devonport. Paradoxically, that leaves the United Kingdom’s southern coast as its most northerly complex warship base.

Oliver Colvile (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Con): Is the hon. Gentleman not aware that the submarines are based up in Scotland? They are coming, in the main, away from Devonport, and we are still responsible for the refitting and refuelling of the nuclear submarines.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: The last time I looked we were discussing the construction of naval vessels, not the basing of weapons of mass destruction. Nevertheless, I am delighted that the Conservative party wants to engage in a strategic look at shipbuilding, because Conservative Members were recently in this very Chamber talking about rebuilding the royal yacht Britannia. While they are away and on into the distance with their pith helmets, the rest of us are left behind with the catastrophe that is Brexit, which I will pick up on later. They can go on to the distance in Britannia.

The capability gap is felt most keenly in Scotland. The northern third of this island, with a coastline longer than that of France and direct access to both the North sea and the Icelandic gap, is left dangerously under-defended at a time when Russian Federation incursions into our territorial waters are beginning to reach cold war levels. The perfect example came in January 2014, when the Russian carrier the Admiral Kuznetsov “took shelter” in the Moray firth. It took the United Kingdom’s fleet ready escort 24 hours to reach the carrier group before it went on its way—although not before dumping its waste in the firth.

The House may have read the recent reports of the Kuznetsov’s imminent return to the waters of the North sea. The carrier group left the port of Severomorsk on Sunday and is expected to make its way towards assisting Russia’s continuing destruction of Aleppo via the North sea and English channel.

Steven Paterson (Stirling) (SNP): A headline in the Norwegian press this week says: “Russia’s biggest warships steam along coast of Norway towards Syria”, just as my hon. Friend has described. The related article says:

“Norway has a frigate, Coast Guard vessels and Orion surveillance aircrafts that have all followed the Russian navy group since it sailed out from the Kola Peninsula into the Barents Sea on Saturday.”

Does he agree that that is a substantial contribution from Norway, and one that the UK would struggle to match?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I certainly do agree with my hon. Friend. That small northern European nation seems far more capable of defending its territorial waters and meetings its obligations to NATO than the United Kingdom.

Amazingly, despite long-standing knowledge of the Kuznetsov’s deployment, and it coming as NATO’s largest annual exercise is taking place in Scotland, the Government have been able to rustle up only one Type 23 frigate and one Type 45 destroyer to escort the carrier group through the UK’s exclusive economic zone, meaning that were the group to split, there would be no way of keeping tabs on the largest ships in the Russian navy. Quite simply, the ageing Type 23 fleet cannot keep pace with the growing number of tasks put forward for it. The understandable challenges of dealing with a 35-year-old platform have led to worrying gaps in the Royal Navy’s most basic capabilities, whether that is the designated fleet ready escort being neither a frigate nor a destroyer, or the frequent and worrying absence of a UK vessel from the NATO standing maritime group in the north Atlantic.

The Government’s contention that a smaller fleet can be justified by increasing versatility can be met only by proceeding with the Type 26 programme. These are highly
capable, versatile, multi-mission warships that would give the Royal Navy the capabilities it needs. Talk about the United Kingdom offering NATO a world-class anti-submarine warfare capability sounds hollow when we do not invest in the primary platform to undertake that, and when investment in other platforms — whether that is the carriers or the Poseidon P-8 maritime patrol aircraft — is called into question because a fundamental part of their support network has been put at risk.

When the Minister responds to the debate, I hope to hear a real commitment to a timetable for cutting steel on the ships, as well as their expected in-service dates.

Kirsten Oswald (East Renfrewshire) (SNP): Does my hon. Friend agree that the delay in giving such a guarantee is an utter betrayal of the workers on the Clyde? It really calls into question both the UK Government’s commitment to conventional defence capability in Scotland and where their priorities truly lie.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I certainly cannot disagree with my hon. Friend.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Martin Docherty-Hughes: To the hon. and gallant Gentleman, I certainly will.

Bob Stewart: Is it the Scottish National party’s policy to increase defence spending to something that in my view would be reasonable: 3% of gross national income? That way, we could provide more Type 26s, Type 23s and Type 45s.

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I have great respect for the hon. and gallant Gentleman, but if we get rid of Trident we might actually be able to cover that.

In introducing this debate, I not only raise to a wider audience my own concerns about the continuing delays to the project, but echo the concerns of the Defence Committee and many prominent former senior Royal Navy officers. When the former First Sea Lord, Admiral Lord West, appeared before the Defence Committee at the start of June, the response to my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman) was that the Ministry of Defence had run out of money for these ships. We were never really given an acceptable answer from the Minister’s Department. Indeed, Admiral Lord West pre-empted the MOD response by expressing the opinion that any contention by the MOD that the problems were principally with the design would be “economical with the actualité”.

Today I will go even further than Lord West and ask the Minister specifically to address the concerns that have been put to me that the scandal of the lack of any timetable for construction of the Type 26 actually masks a wider problem of a continuing lack of investment in the Clyde yards, putting their long-term future at risk and jeopardising the jobs and skills of thousands of workers at Govan and Scotstoun.

In the lead-up to the announcement of the plans for the Type 26 programme, the workers at those two yards were offered a clear quid pro quo. There would be a significant restructuring in the workforce, including job losses, but that would be offset by investments that would guarantee jobs for a generation. At the height of the referendum on Scottish independence, the Minister’s Department explicitly tied that investment to the no vote. There would be 13 Type 26 frigates built on the Clyde, in a brand new “frigate factory”, to protect the workers from the west of Scotland’s rather inclement weather.

When we heard last November in the strategic defence and security review that the number of Type 26s being built would be reduced still further, trade unions told my Scottish National party colleagues — and others, I am sure — that that was not a huge concern, because the infrastructure investment for building the Type 26 would ensure that the new general-purpose frigate would also be built on the Clyde. So the Clyde waited — and waited, and waited — until the planned date for the cutting of steel came and went, until it emerged that there was a £750 million gap in infrastructure investment and until it became clear that the UK Government were rubber-ear ing our questions about the GPFF being built on the Clyde.

This is a tale of underinvestment and neglect, and I can relate to it. Perhaps — just perhaps — this is a deliberate Tory strategy, and one that has form on the Clyde. The Minister may not remember the names of former Ministers; on these Benches, we will not forget one: that of Nicholas Ridley. When Jimmy Reid, the late patriot, presented the Ridley letters, which were written in 1969, to the Scottish Trade Union Congress, they proved that the Tory Government had outrageously planned the closure of the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders. By their inaction, this Government are following a well-trodden path in this regard. The Tories are making a political decision, rather than a strategic one.

In the context of current naval investment, the delay in building these vessels could be seen as excusable if there was an understanding that the ministerial promises to the highly skilled and dedicated workforce of these yards would be upheld. The fact is that these workers and my colleagues are all listening with increasing concern to the Government’s deafening silence on the subject of the GPFF, and although we appreciate that there is a shipbuilding strategy to come in November, the MOD must at least give reassurances before then.

However, even as workers on the Clyde work outside in all weathers, the Government have not been slow in coming through with investment elsewhere. In Barrow, those workers who are working on the multi-billion pound Successor programme to Trident are being kept dry by the Government investment there, which includes an indoor assembly hall. There could be no better illustration of my contention that every penny spent on Trident is a penny less spent on conventional defence. Trident costs have not always been part of the MOD budget, but now that they are, the Government’s intention to ring-fence the MOD budget and other budgets has led us to this inescapable conclusion.

It may not come as a surprise to hear that I say that, as I am a member of the Scottish National party, but I am echoing the assessment made by General Sir Richard Shirreff in front of the Defence Committee last year, and the assessment of General Sir Richard Barrons, which was revealed in the Financial Times in September. Vital capabilities such as the Type 26 have been “withered by design”, as a result of the MOD
priorities that place unusable weapons of mass destruction above the defence of the state. “Preserving the shop window” means workers on the Clyde worry about their job security as vital infrastructure investment is kept to a bare minimum.

I will end my opening speech by reiterating the two questions that I hope the Minister will address. First, how will the UK Government address the worrying gaps in national security caused by the ongoing failure of the MOD to build the Type 26 on time? Secondly, will the Minister give the workers of the Clyde a timetable for construction of the Type 26 and address their concerns about the total and complete lack of investment in infrastructure to support the GPFF, which would guarantee their job security beyond the medium term? I await the Minister’s answer; they await the Minister’s answer.

Mr Philip Hollobone (in the Chair): The guideline for Front-Bench responses is five minutes for the Scottish National party, five minutes for Her Majesty’s Opposition and 10 minutes for the Minister. Therefore, I will call the Front-Bench spokespersons no later than 5.07 pm. Mr Docherty-Hughes will have three minutes to sum up the debate at the very end. The time between now and 5.07 pm is for Back Benchers.

4.46 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, Mr Hollobone.

First, I thank the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) for setting the scene, and for expressing his concerns, needs and wishes regarding shipbuilding in his own constituency and across Scotland. These issues are very important for us all—each and every one of us. I declare an interest, as I am a Member of the Defence Committee, as indeed are a significant number of the Members who are here in Westminster Hall today.

It is a pleasure to speak on an issue that is of great interest. Indeed, the Defence Committee is holding an inquiry on naval procurement, including the procurement of the Type 26s, as it really is a matter of great importance.

The hon. Gentleman outlined the importance of the construction of the Type 26 for jobs first of all, but also for the security of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. As I always say, and I say again now, we are better together. It is a real pleasure to speak on this issue and to put that marker down as well. I am very fond of my colleagues from the Scottish National party who surround me; I look upon them as friends and it is good to come along and contribute to a debate that interests them, interests me and interests this House.

There is a reason why we are world-renowned for our Navy—it is because we get the best. To get the best, we must put in the best, as well, and ensure that the Navy’s equipment is up to date and, more importantly, up to scratch. The Government plan to spend some £19 billion over the next decade on surface ships for the Royal Navy and the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Service. On page four of the Library briefing for this debate—I commend the background guys for the work that they have done; the information in the briefing is excellent—it says:

“The Strategy is intended to place UK warship shipbuilding on a sustainable longterm footing.”

That was said by a Defence Minister, Earl Howe, in September.

In November 2014, the Minister of State, Department of Health, the hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), who was the Minister responsible for defence procurement at the time—by the way, he was an excellent Minister and the meetings we had with him were always very positive and helpful—said that complex warships for the Royal Navy were only built in UK shipyards.

There is also a particular comment in the Library briefing that I love, namely, that we must maintain “a ‘steady drum-beat’ of orders”, which the Library briefing says “is often mentioned by those following the Navy’s acquisition programme.” Those are some of the comments that I have taken from the Library briefing.

A substantial portion of this planned work will be for the Navy’s new fleet of frigates. The remainder is divided between money that has already been committed to completing the new aircraft carriers, offshore patrol vessels and tanker ships, and maintenance and support for in-service equipment. Clearly, there is a commitment to the British fleet and to the Royal Navy, and we want to make sure that that continues. It is my desire, and it was the desire of the former Defence Secretary, Mr Hollobone, to see the new British fleet built in Britain. As we have said, we are marching to the steady drumbeat of orders, and that must be the way we move.

We are renowned in Northern Ireland for shipbuilding, through Harland and Wolff. Many Members will know that; I am not sure where those who do not know it have been living. I have heard many jokes about the Titanic, and all I have to say is this: it was fine when it left Belfast. Joking aside, we have the ability within the United Kingdom to build our own fleet, and that must be a priority. We must ensure that the Royal Navy’s replacement of the current 13-strong frigate fleet, which will begin to leave service in 2023, is manufactured on our shores. We need that commitment, and I believe that the Minister will give us it—I wait eagerly for her response and I thank her for being here.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con): It has been nice to hear that shipbuilding is important not only to Scotland but to Northern Ireland, England and Wales. In my constituency, I have David Brown Gear Systems Ltd. The company used to make tractors and owned Aston Martin—the DB9—and it now makes the gears for propulsion systems. I thank the hon. Gentleman for saying that the matter covers all elements of our United Kingdom shipbuilding and, like him, I look forward to hearing from the Minister about the wonderful Type 26.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for clearly underlining the great experience and talent we have across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in building, creating and manufacturing things that can be to our benefit.

Oliver Colvile: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that, although the Titanic may have left from his province, the passengers came back to Plymouth? We in Devonport are really looking forward to welcoming the Type 26s if, as we hope, they are base-ported down in Plymouth.
Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman has a passion for the Royal Navy and the Royal Marines. I know that from his interventions in discussions and from the comments he makes. I am given to understand that there is a delay with the frigate fleet, but we must not and cannot cut the number of Type 26 frigates and opt for a new, cheaper, general purpose frigate. Will the Minister confirm that we will have the frigate we wish to have and not a cheaper one? I return to my original point—to be the best we must have the best. We have an industry that can and will make the ships to the highest of standards, to keep our Royal Navy in a position where it is effective and ready, and we have an industry that is crying out for the work. Those two needs can and should go hand in hand. As the hon. Member for Colne Valley (Jason McCartney) said, we have a high quality of workmanship across the whole of the United Kingdom.

I would of course wish for Harland and Wolff to have its share of any work that can be carried out. That is natural, having grown up as I did, with men around me going to the shipyard for their day’s work. I can remember as a boy—and that was not yesterday—many people from my constituency going to Harland and Wolff. The manufacturing base we had in Northern Ireland was certainly one of the best. However, what is most important for me is that the ships are built to meet the needs of the Royal Navy and that they are not pared back to suit cost analysing.

I have spoken out often—some may say loudly on occasion—against the paring back of any of our armed forces, and many in this Chamber do likewise. We should be under no illusion: the Royal Navy provides us with a security that is as necessary today as it ever has been. In the armed forces all-party group we go to dinners and hear speeches on behalf of the Royal Navy and we are always impressed by what we see and hear and by the efficient, modern, up-to-scratch Royal Navy that can combat any in the world. As a nation that might not be labelled as “at war” but is certainly instrumental in international peacekeeping, it is essential that we look at the Royal Navy and that they are not pared back to suit cost analysing.

4.55 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. As the Member who has the privilege of representing the Govan shipyards, it is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) for securing it.

There remain a number of questions to be asked this afternoon, but possibly the simplest one can best be described as: does eight plus five equal 13? That is important, in understanding the history of where we are. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire highlighted, the history started before the independence referendum, with promises of 13 Type 26 frigates. Last November, at the strategic defence and security review, we were given the assurance: “It’s okay. There won’t be 13 Type 26 frigates; there’ll be eight Type 26 frigates and five light, general purpose ones.” There is nothing to worry about, was the message given to the workforce on the Clyde. I ask that simple question because I know that the workforce on the Clyde and the trade unions are frustrated by and worried about the delays in the timetable for the Type 26. The original date for cutting steel was May 2016; it would be useful if the Minister could give reasons for the delay in the procurement. Despite 15 written questions, I have received no meaningful answers.

Bob Stewart: I do not think we need the Minister to answer that. The answer is that we had no money; that is why we had to cut down the number of Type 26 ships.

[Interruption.] We did not have the money, and we have to cut our coat to suit our cloth.

Chris Stephens: The hon. Gentleman may say that, and I may come on to that point, but the Government have never confirmed that is the reason for the delay, and it would be useful if they were to say that today. If he is correct that there was a lack of money, I am sure that there are Committees and hon. Members in the House who would want to ask what happened with the money.

Lord West suggested to the Defence Committee that the defence budget for shipbuilding was spent. In answer to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and West Fife (Douglas Chapman), he said:

“Shall I tell you what the problem is? Notwithstanding having said how much extra money there is for defence, in the near years there is not. There is almost no extra money available this year, and we are really strapped next year. The Government aren’t coming clean about that. I think if they did, people would understand.”

In answer to further questions, he outlined that delays can be costly in the long run. In response to the Chair of the Committee, he said:

“Every delay costs you money. These delays all cost money. You need a steady drumbeat of orders to keep high-tech industries going. Our complex surface warship building industry, like the submarine one, needs a steady drumbeat of orders.”

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): My hon. Friend talks about the drumbeat and the starting point for the project. Is it not one of the key concerns that, even when the project starts, if the drumbeat is extended and...
the length of time for the completion of each ship is extended, by the nature of that equation, fewer workers will be needed?

Chris Stephens: That concern is felt not only by my hon. Friends, but by me and, crucially, the trade unions and workforce on the Clyde. What economic impact assessment has been carried out on delaying the Type 26 frigates? We know from an excellent report by the Fraser of Allander Institute, which was commissioned by GMB Scotland, that the two BAE yards at Govan and Scotstoun directly employ a total of 2,723 people. More than 1,000 of them, men and women, are skilled tradespersons. I am delighted that there has been an increase in women apprentices and women workers highly involved in high-tech industry. The report estimates that the two yards in Glasgow support a total of 5,943 jobs and, through that, £162.7 million of wages across Scotland as a whole. Returning to my original “eight plus five” question, will the Minister confirm whether the general principle stated that the Type 26 Frigates will also be built on the Clyde, as confirmed by the former Prime Minister in the strategic defence and security review in November 2015?

We know that a national shipbuilding strategy will be announced soon. I am looking forward to that, when it comes, that we should not underestimate the frustrations of the workforce. They want to build ships. They want a long-term future for the Clyde that will begin with cutting steel for Type 26 frigates. I look forward to the Minister’s response to my questions.

5.1 pm

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) on securing this important debate, and I echo his call for the UK Government to come clean on when work will start on the Type 26 programme. He put forward the compelling case that what we are witnessing has all the hallmarks of the T ype 26 programme. He put forward the compelling case that what we are witnessing has all the hallmarks of another sorry tale of under-investment, neglect and broken promises to workers on the Clyde.

The workers on the Clyde have no better champion than my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), and he was absolutely correct when he pointed out that in the run-up to the 2014 referendum on independence, we were promised that if we remained within the United Kingdom, there would be 13 new Type 26 frigates. That was unequivocal. That was the figure we were told. However, fast-forward barely a year, and in the 2015 SDSR, that figure was reduced to eight, alongside a vague, unwritten promise of five light frigates.

Steven Paterson: To back up my hon. Friend, I have a leaflet that was put around by the Labour party during the referendum campaign. It states, unequivocally: “Within the UK Govan and Scotstoun will get the order for 13 Type-26 frigates from the Royal Navy.”

What does he make of that?

Brendan O’Hara: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct. It is one of many broken promises that I am sure will not be forgotten.

Ian Murray: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Brendan O’Hara: I will. I thought the hon. Gentleman might want to intervene on this point.

Ian Murray: I am sorry that the cross-party consensus on such an important issue has been so ineluctably broken, but will the hon. Gentleman tell the House how many frigates would have been built had people voted yes in 2014?

Brendan O’Hara: Had the hon. Gentleman been in his place at the start of the debate, he would have seen that there was cross-party consensus. We were being very consensual. The Scottish people and the Scottish workforce have been betrayed by the Government. The hon. Gentleman would do well to focus on the Government and their betrayal, rather than attacking people who are defending Scottish workers.

With the old Type 23 frigates being withdrawn from service in 2023, the Type 26 programme had to start in early 2015, but the manufacturing of the eight ships will now not begin until the summer of 2017 at the earliest, with at least one union convenor saying that it will not begin until 2018. That is a delay of at least two years, and possibly three. As we have heard, the lesson from all defence procurement deals is that if there are delays, costs will always increase.

What is the reason for the delay? Is it that the Government think that we no longer need Type 26s? That is not the case. As Peter Roberts, a senior research fellow at the Royal United Service Institute, said, the Government are talking about “a level of Russian submarine activity that we have not seen since the 1980s...That poses a significant threat for the UK”.

If the delay is not on the grounds of national security, and it is not a strategic decision, it can only be based on cost. Perhaps Lord West of Spithead, the former First Sea Lord, was absolutely right when he said that “there is not enough money in the MOD” to start construction. He said that before Brexit, and he could say it with bells on now.

Despite the Minister’s protestations that the “national shipbuilding strategy...is not something that is affected by the outcome of the referendum”, we all know that if prices are denominated in dollars, costs will soar.

When the Secretary of State for Defence came to the House on 27 June—the first day the House sat after the EU referendum—he said that he was “not prepared to sign a contract with BAE Systems until I am absolutely persuaded that it is in the best interests of the taxpayer”.—[Official Report, 12 September 2016; Vol. 614, c. 592.]

Are we to assume that that was mere coincidence? The hon. and gallant Member for Beckenham (Bob Stewart) got it absolutely right when he said that the project has been delayed because the Government have run out of money. They have run out of money because they have committed far too much of their procurement budget to Trident. It would be an unforgivable betrayal of the Clyde workers if they were the ones who had to pay not only the price of Brexit, but the price of Trident, which has been ring-fenced within defence procurement. Once again, it appears that the Government are prepared to sacrifice our conventional defence capabilities to their obsession with Trident and nuclear weapons. I look forward to the Minister letting me know about that.
If there is not a lack of will and there is sufficient money, prove us wrong and give us a start date. The workers on the Clyde have had far too many broken promises. An important supply chain is at risk in the defence manufacturing sector. We need confirmation that the five general purpose frigates will also be built on the Clyde. I would appreciate it if the Minister addressed that point in her remarks. The work needs to start now. The workers on the Clyde have been betrayed too often. Will the Minister break that chain of betrayal and let-down? Give us a date for when work on the Type 26 programme will start.

5.8 pm

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hollobone. It has been said that confusion and muddle have been the hallmark of the Government’s approach towards naval shipbuilding in recent years. Nowhere is that lack of clarity more in evidence than when it comes to the construction of frigates.

The Navy has 13 Type 23 frigates. As we have heard, there was a strong suggestion in the 2010 strategic defence and security review that 13 Type 26 frigates should be constructed in place of those 13 Type 23 frigates. We were told that manufacturing of those new frigates would begin in 2015-16, but the 2015 SDSR cut the number from 13 to eight. At that time, the Government gave a weak commitment to building at least five new general purpose frigates, possibly more. They have yet to agree a manufacturing date with BAE Systems for the Type 26 frigates, and the demonstration phase on those frigates was extended in March 2016 by a further year. At the same time, BAE Systems has been building three offshore patrol vessels, and the Government plan to have two more of those. That general factual background leads to a number of key questions that have been touched on in the debate, and that I want to underline.

First, with regard to timescale, if the Government do not give the go-ahead and the date for the cutting of steel is not before summer next year, the production trades will have almost finished manufacturing work on those offshore patrol vessel programmes, and will have no work to carry on with. In other words, there will be a hiatus. The trade skills that are required for the construction of the offshore patrol vessels will be lost and will not be able to be deployed other than at significant cost, with more delays and more training. It is important that the Government come clean; they must have some idea of the start date, and I hope that the Minister will tell us when that will be.

The second question is again on the issue of skills and the dovetailing that will be necessary between the Type 26 programme and the programme for the general purpose frigates. The trade unions have pointed out that as the Type 26 programme design phase is decreasing, the ship designers will need another programme to work on, so we need specifics from the Government on the general purpose frigate programme as well. What is the Government’s intention in that regard?

Thirdly, we have already seen delay—hopefully there will not be more—but what does that mean for the existing Type 23 frigates? The Government have said that there is to be no extension of their lifespan. Is that still the case? I have been told that the Type 23 frigates have already exceeded their original design life. If they are kept in service, there are implications for the Navy, in terms of fulfilling the requirements that those frigates meet.

The final question is on cost, and clarity would be desirable here. As we have heard, there have been suggestions that because of the Government’s continuing austerity programme and the hardening of cuts, it is becoming increasingly expensive for them to make real their previous commitments. Admiral Sir Philip Jones, the First Sea Lord and head of the Navy, suggested that when he told MPs on the Select Committee that one problem is the cost of designing quiet ships; the technology is far more expensive than was originally envisaged. That may or may not be the case, but what is very important, on that and on the other issues raised this afternoon, is that we have clarity and certainty from the Government.

Chris Stephens: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that delays have an economic impact, and not just on Govan, Scotstoun or Scotland? There is a wider economic impact. If there is a delay, that will mean a more expensive programme in the long run.

Wayne David: Broadly speaking, that is correct. There will certainly be excessive costs if the Type 23 frigates are required to stay in service beyond their natural design life. Also, with most programmes, and certainly with defence procurement programmes, the longer the programmes, the more the delay and the greater the costs. There is also an impact on the workforce, with greater uncertainty and greater job insecurity. On all these issues, what is required is, at the very least, clarity from the Government. I thank the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) very much for bringing forward this issue today.

5.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Harriett Baldwin): Let me start by saying what a pleasure it is to serve under your chairmanship this afternoon, Mr Hollobone. I congratulate the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes) on securing this debate and for providing me with the opportunity to update the House on this important subject.

The 2015 strategic defence and security review restated this Government’s commitment to the Type 26 global combat ship programme. It was a positive strategic defence and security review for the Royal Navy, committing to an increase in the size of the service for the first time in a generation.

There has been a high level of interest in the programme since we announced our plans and, along with ministerial colleagues, have consistently confirmed the Government’s continuing commitment to it. Let me once again reiterate that commitment. The Type 26 global combat ships remain critical for the Royal Navy and nothing has changed since last year’s strategic defence and security review. We are going ahead with eight anti-submarine warfare ships and all eight ships will be built at the BAE Systems shipyards on the Clyde.

We have backed up our commitment with significant investment as we continue to progress the Type 26 programme. We announced in March this year the award

[End of transcription]
of a contract with BAE Systems, valued at £472 million, to extend the Type 26 demonstration phase to June 2017, enabling us to continue work with industry to develop an optimised schedule for the programme to reflect the outcome of the strategic defence and security review; to mature further the detailed ship design ahead of the start of manufacture; to invest in shore testing facilities; and to extend our investment in the wider supply chain to cover almost all the equipment for the first three ships.

Wayne David: I welcome what the Minister has said, but it is worth pointing out that so far there is nothing new in it. Will she tell us when the manufacturing start date will be?

Harriett Baldwin: I did not say that in updating the House there would necessarily be anything new, but I do want to reiterate the commitments that I have previously made.

The work will benefit suppliers across the country, injecting an estimated £200 million into the UK supply chain and sustaining 1,600 high-quality jobs, an estimated 600 of which—more than a third—are in Scotland. From Loanhead in Midlothian, where the helicopter handling equipment will be built, to Fleet in Hampshire, where communications equipment will be developed; from Dunfermline in Fife, where the steering gear will be built, to Huddersfield in West Yorkshire, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Jason McCartney), where the gearboxes will be constructed—this investment is good news for UK industry. Furthermore, we announced in July the latest commitment of £183 million to buy the maritime indirect fires system—the five-inch gun—for the first three ships. That takes our total investment in the Type 26 programme so far to £1.8 billion, which is hard evidence not only of our commitment to the programme but of real progress in delivery.

Chris Stephens: Like the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David), I am guessing that we are not going to get a date for cutting steel this afternoon. Is it the Ministry of Defence’s intention to tell us the expected date for cutting steel on the Clyde before or after the autumn statement?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Gentleman is going to get a lot of interesting stuff from me this afternoon, so he will have to sit on the edge of his seat as I speak. I will give the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire three minutes to sum up.

A key focus of this afternoon’s questions has been the timetable for the programme and the building of the ships. The timing of the award of the build contract and the build schedule itself are key components of the ongoing commercial negotiations between the Government and BAE Systems. We are negotiating a deal that aims to optimise the Royal Navy’s requirements, in terms of the capability that the ships will deliver; to achieve value for money for defence and the taxpayer; and to deliver a build schedule that drives performance by industry. Those negotiations are continuing, so I am not in a position to give a specific date for when an agreement will be reached. I am sure hon. Members will appreciate that, to protect the Ministry of Defence’s commercial interests, disclosing any such detail would be inappropriate at this time.

Douglas Chapman (Dunfermline and West Fife) (SNP): The Government have given assurances to Lockheed Martin and those working on the F-35s in Fort Worth in America right through to the end of 2030, but they are totally unable to do so to the workforce at BAE Systems in Scotstoun and Govan to the end of this decade. Surely there is a mismatch between their commitment to British workers and their commitment to those in America.

Harriett Baldwin: With the greatest respect, I do not accept the hon. Gentleman’s statement. We have an incredibly ambitious shipbuilding programme in this country. In Scotland at the moment, we are building the two largest warships that the Royal Navy will ever take delivery of. The hon. Gentleman cannot complain in any way about the ambition of our shipbuilding programme in the Clyde; I do not accept that in any way, shape or form.

I want to touch on the national shipbuilding strategy, which was raised by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and others. I hope the assiduous Member for Strangford has had a chance to meet with Sir John Parker, who hails from Northern Ireland, as part of his review. He is a leading authority on naval shipbuilding and was appointed independent chair of the shipbuilding strategy. He will make his recommendations by the time of the autumn statement.

Jim Shannon: The Minister will be aware that Sir Mark Stanhope, the First Sea Lord of the Navy, attended the Defence Committee. He said that if we do not cut the steel soon, some very old frigates will be protecting brand new carriers and the strategic nuclear deterrent, and he warned that the Navy is in danger of not being able to fulfil all the requirements expected of it. The date is so important—can the Minister give it to us?

Harriett Baldwin: In answers to the House, we have disclosed the out-of-service dates for the existing Type 23 frigates. They are a matter of public record. Clearly, the acquisition of the Type 26 global combat ship will be crucial to the future of the UK’s shipbuilding industry, and will form part of the national shipbuilding strategy. The Type 26 global combat ship will form a key component of the future maritime force, but last year’s strategic defence and security review also considered more widely how it will replace our current in-service frigates.

Hansard Home: Hon. Members will be aware that there are currently 13 Type 23 frigates in service with the Royal Navy. The eight Type 26 global combat ships will be built to replace the current eight anti-submarine warfare Type 23 frigates on a one-for-one basis. The capability currently provided by the five general-purpose Type 23 frigates will be met by a new class of light, general-purpose frigate that will, by the 2030s, enable us to increase the overall number of frigates. The programme to take that commitment forward is in its pre-concept phase and is a key part of the national shipbuilding strategy. I look forward to receiving Sir John Parker’s recommendations on taking the programme forward soon.

Brendan O’Hara: If the Minister is unable to give a date for when the steel will be cut on the Type 26s, will she at least confirm that the five general-purpose frigates will be built on the Clyde?
Harriett Baldwin: I have given the hon. Gentleman a range of dates for some of the commitments we have already made and some of the contracts we have already placed as a result of this programme, which sustain jobs across the UK.

The need to ensure we have the skills required to deliver Type 26 also came up in the debate. That is an essential factor in the successful delivery of the programme and is crucial to our strategic aim of placing UK shipbuilding on a sustainable long-term footing.

In the interests of time, I will quickly skip through the issue of offshore patrol vessels. We are looking forward to the delivery of HMS Forth—a ship of that class—next year, and HMS Medway and HMS Trent remain on track.

It is important to put the Type 26 programme in its wider context. Overall, last year’s SDSR achieved a positive and balanced outcome. We are growing the defence budget in real terms for the first time in six years and delivering on our commitment to spend at least 2% of GDP on defence. The SDSR enables us to invest £178 billion in new equipment for our armed forces over the next decade, an increase of £12 billion on previous plans. In the maritime sector, we have set the trajectory for expansion of the Royal Navy’s frigate fleet as we spend about £8 billion on Royal Navy surface warships over the next decade.

As I have explained, we continue to progress the Type 26 global combat ship programme. Hon. Members with constituents who work at the shipyards on the Clyde rightly emphasised the importance of the Type 26 global combat ship programme to the workforce. In response to concerns expressed on their behalf, the Ministry of Defence has consistently restated its commitment to the programme and confirmed that all eight ships will be built on the Clyde. There should be no lingering doubt on that point or on the idea that Royal Navy vessels would be built on the Clyde had Scotland voted to leave the United Kingdom.

Chris Stephens: The Minister mentioned the national shipbuilding strategy, which has to report by the autumn statement. I am going to ask the question I asked earlier: does she expect an announcement on the procurement of Type 26 frigates by the autumn statement? That would be helpful for my constituents.

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Gentleman is doing the right thing in representing the interests of his constituents. He is correct that the national shipbuilding strategy will report by the autumn statement.

Let me conclude, because I want to leave time for the hon. Member for West Dunbartonshire. It is of crucial importance to the Royal Navy that the Type 26 programme delivers the capability it needs. Equally, for the taxpayer it is crucial to ensure the delivery of a programme that represents value for money for the scale of investment it represents.

5.27 pm

Martin Docherty-Hughes: I thank all hon. Members who spoke in this debate, and I thank the Minister and the shadow Minister for their participation.

The Minister talked about good news, but this is good news with no timeframe. It is just talk—a footnote in Hansard. It is of no use to the communities of Govan and Scotstoun and those on the Clyde, whose families rely on the cutting of steel. The Minister talked about Scotland’s place in the Union and said, critically, that no ships would have been built there if we had left the Union. At this rate, there will be no ships built anywhere in Britain, never mind in Scotland. We might just farm them out to South Korea—it would be a wee bit cheaper.

Yet again, there is grave concern across the Chamber. I accept the point of view of the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). We may disagree on the constitution, but the history of shipbuilding in Belfast mirrors the history of shipbuilding on the Clyde. There is nothing about being better together, I am afraid. To those Members who look forward to HMNB Devonport housing the Type 26s, I say this: we need to get rid of the Type 45s first, and they are not working.

I again pressure the Minister, when the statement comes forward in November, to give us the date. Tell us when we are cutting steel. Let us get on with it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the timetable for building Type 26 frigates on the Clyde.

5.28 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Wednesday 19 October 2016

[MRS CHERYL GILLAN in the Chair]

Almshouses

9.30 am

Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered almshouses and their role in housing policy.

I acknowledge at the outset the assistance I received from Charlie Corlett, who interned in my office over the summer, in preparing my contribution to this important debate.

For the past four years, I have served on the housing and care committee of my city livery company, the Merchant Taylors; we take responsibility for the 130 or so almshouses that the livery company owns and manages in Lewisham and Lee in south-east London. At a time when public policy urgently demands greater housing availability, we should not forget one of the more traditional social housing classes. The almshouse sector thrives and should properly be regarded as having an important part to play in the ongoing housing ecosystem of the 21st century.

Almshouses are the oldest form of social housing. They collectively house some 35,000 of our fellow citizens with limited financial means. In many rural areas in the UK, almshouses are the only source of housing for those in need and therefore play an important role in the social housing landscape.

With fewer new homes being built, house prices still increasing and an ever ageing population, the need for almshouses has never been greater. I also think that a number of philanthropists would regard an investment in almshouses as an appropriate way of making a contribution in the longer term, particularly in the light of the safeguards that I will come on to later in my speech. I hope that we can raise the profile of almshouses through the all-party group on almshouses, through debates such as this one and through sensitive Government policy, and I will come on to a couple of issues that I hope the Minister will address.

Let me give some background. Almshouses play an important role in providing not only dwellings for the vulnerable or elderly but an additional level of care that cannot be found in other forms of social housing. Most of the charities that run almshouses still provide wardens, who have been shown to be pivotal in the reduction of the social isolation that is all too prevalent among elderly people. It is also especially important that residents have someone to call if they are in need. That very personal relationship between trustees and residents is expressed strongly by the Almshouse Association, a support charity representing 95% of all almshouse charities in the UK. Prince Charles, a patron of the association, has observed that there is a “unique bond” between trustee and beneficiary, and that many trustees are willing to give something substantial back to their community because they grew up nearby. There are also communal areas in many schemes where the tenants can socialise.

With four fifths of almshouse charities in the UK running fewer than 20 dwellings, each charity can provide a higher standard of care for its residents. Almshouses, especially for the elderly, strike the right balance between the required level of care and the dignity and independence that could be ignored in an alternative form of accommodation. As the broadcaster David Dimbleby, who is vice-patron of the Almshouse Association, puts it:

“Almshouses are communities of people choosing to live together for their mutual comfort and support. Where old people’s homes can often have an air of despair, the elderly being abandoned by their families, almshouses speak of optimism and confidence in old age.”

In general, almshouses have played an important role in creating a stable environment for people who need an intermediate option between common social housing and care homes.

The Almshouse Association does a significant amount of work on the preservation of its ancient buildings. My experience with the Merchant Taylors is of a mix of housing: we have some very modern new build on a particular site in Lewisham, but literally a stone’s throw away there is one of our most popular listed buildings, which goes back to the 1820s, and which the company had at a time when that part of what was then Kent, and is now a bustling inner-London borough, was made up of open country.

In an appeal made on the Almshouse Association’s 65th anniversary, its chairman Simon Pott condensed its motives into three simple points:

“supporting member charities in providing good quality housing for those in need, promoting the welfare and independence of residents and preserving the historic tradition of almshouses for the enjoyment of future generations.”

Almshouses also make a significant contribution to our national heritage: 35% of their buildings are listed. Simon Pott states that the almshouse movement today is “vibrant” and “progressive”, and I vouch for that. The durability of these institutions throughout the past millennium and the critical role they play today are reason enough to justify the support that they rightly receive.

I was delighted to launch the all-party group on almshouses last month with the hon. Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch), who apologises for not being able to come down from west Yorkshire today because of the important by-election in her neighbouring constituency of Batley and Spen tomorrow, but who is here in spirit. I know she supports, on a cross-party basis, much of what I am saying today. In setting up the all-party group, we wanted to draw attention to almshouses as a vital component of our housing sector, and to highlight some of the legislative challenges that they face in the 21st century, a number of which I shall draw to the Minister’s attention today.
A portion of almshouse charities are not registered social landlords—RSLs—and that can create specific challenges in relation to part 3 of the Housing Act 2004 and the national planning policy framework. The Act allows local authorities to designate geographical zones that feature particular types of deprivation, within which providers of residential accommodation can be required to hold a licence for each dwelling that they own or manage. Local authorities can charge a fee for such licences. The rationale for that policy is to identify rogue private landlords and clamp down on some of their worst practices.

Unfortunately, unless almshouse charities are RSLs, they can be inadvertently caught out by that legislation. It would be unfortunate for them to be regarded as being risky, as if they were rogue landlords. Consequently, such charities, many of which have only a handful of properties under their auspices, can be forced to pay tens of thousands of pounds for licences for the homes they provide, even though they manifestly do not exhibit the characteristics of rogue private landlords. They cannot pass on the costs of the licence to residents, since that would cause financial hardship and would probably be forbidden under charity law.

The Almshouse Association made a submission to the Department for Communities and Local Government's consultation on houses in multiple occupation in December 2015. It asked for a statutory instrument to exempt almshouses from the legislation, but I understand that to date there has been no progress on that. Can the Minister confirm that we will get that legislation in place as soon as possible?

Almshouses have been caused difficulties by some local authorities' interpretation of what constitutes affordable housing under the national planning policy framework. In cases where almshouses are not formally registered as providers of social housing, a number of councils have required almshouse charities to meet section 106 obligations, when the charities themselves have been developing new almshouse dwellings. That approach is clearly paradoxical, since the dwellings fit the statutory definition of social housing in the Housing and Regeneration Act 2008. The Almshouse Association made a detailed submission to a DCLG consultation in February, but as I understand it, a formal and final response is still awaited.

On almshouse charities that are RSLs, there is concern about the impact of the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016, which obliges rent for tenants to be cut by 1% per year for four years. Under the Act, “tenant” was understandably defined in a way that included almshouse residents, but the definition of “rent” included the modest contribution that residents are asked to make to maintenance costs. In that instance, the Government were responsive to the concerns of the Almshouse Association and exempted RSL almshouses from the obligation for at least a year. The association is anxious to ensure that that correct exemption is made permanent.

The Minister will be aware of the proposal to cap housing benefit at local housing allowance rates for residents of registered social landlords. That will potentially have a significant—indeed, devastating—impact on the finances of some almshouse RSLs, as charity law prevents them from charging a weekly maintenance contribution, which would put residents in financial hardship. In recent years, many almshouse charities have built high-specification accommodation for pensioners under the affordable homes programme, which assumes that charities will be able to charge residents up to 80% of the local market rent. The charities committed to the affordable homes programme on the assumption that a weekly maintenance contribution at that level would be covered by housing benefit. When that concern was raised with the Government, a short-term exception was made once again, but understandably, almshouse RSLs would like to see the arrangement made permanent and explicit.

Given the historical roots of so many almshouses, it goes without saying that most almshouse charities were founded long before the Equality Act 2010 came to pass. However, a significant number of almshouses have constitutions that, alongside the basic criterion of need, restrict the beneficiary class, perhaps by age or gender, or sometimes by religious belief. In order to make such restrictions lawful, the charity must, of course, satisfy a plethora of Government bodies that the restriction is a proportionate means of satisfying an existing housing need—something that such bodies can understandably be a little jumpy about endorsing. The Almshouse Association reckons that the issue be overcome through an amendment to the 2010 Act effectively stating that, in the context of their charitable rules, almshouses are deemed to meet the test.

All that only goes to highlight a somewhat wider problem, whereby housing legislation and the associated regulation increasingly conflicts with charity law, making it difficult for trustees to be absolutely sure that they have achieved full compliance. That goes well beyond the issue of almshouses. New charitable legislation has come into being, but even more legislation does not, of course, mean that the loopholes are being closed, and sometimes new problems arise.

Almshouses are a vital contribution to the social housing landscape in the UK, providing care and decent living standards—really, they are rather better than decent; in large numbers of cases, they provide superior living standards—for vulnerable groups of people in all corners of our nation. I trust that the Minister will take up some of the issues that I have raised. I made sure he was aware in advance of what I wanted to say, so hopefully he will provide satisfaction on some of the points. On others, though, he may have to go back to his Department. I hope that, alongside the establishment of the new all-party group, my speech will mark a fresh chapter in Parliament’s understanding of the almshouse movement and, beyond that, ensure that it will thrive for many centuries to come.

Moreover, as I have said, I hope that more knowledge of almshouses will inspire a new generation of philanthropists to make their contribution, in this century, to alleviating the problems of housing shortage, especially, but not exclusively, for the less well-off in our communities. We have to recognise that the housing crisis—I shall use that term, for want of a better one, although I know that it is, to a certain extent, subject to political dispute—means that we have to use every tool in our toolbox. Our landscape will not be covered with almshouses tomorrow—we will not go from 35,000 to 350,000 overnight—but they are part and parcel of that effort.

Philanthropists should feel that, through almshouses, they can make a longer-term contribution to solving the genuine problem we have with housing shortage. They can last through many generations to come. It would be
a wonderful development if modern almshouses were to sprout up in villages, towns and cities in the decades ahead. I hope that this debate will help to start the process of making sure that we, as opinion formers and policy makers, can make the almshouse movement strong for this century and beyond.

9.45 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field) on setting out the case so clearly for us all. He made sure that the issues that are specific and perhaps peculiar to almshouses are on the record. I am not aware of any almshouse charities in Northern Ireland, but the issues the right hon. Gentleman discussed are important. It is also important to put on the record our need for such organisations to deliver throughout society, which they very clearly do and must continue to do. I thank those who prepared the background information on this debate. It is very detailed and helpful and will help with my contribution. I shall make only a brief speech, but it is important that we put on the record the importance of almshouses and of charity.

Over the years, people with compassion have stepped in with charity when Governments have perhaps been unable to help. There are around 160,000 general charities in the UK. According to the “UK Civil Society Almanac 2012”, charities have a combined income of some £37 billion. That is money raised from charitable giving, charity shops and fundraising events, and by volunteers actively trying to make people’s lives better. That is the core issue of this debate, as has been made clear. Charities provide for and help people when they are abandoned by others—such help has to be encouraged at this time.

Almshouses are charitable organisations, some of which are also registered social landlords, and mainly specialise in housing for the elderly. They specifically set out to help those who are vulnerable and in need of help and care that they cannot get or are not getting through the welfare system. There is a specific role for the work that almshouses and charitable organisations do for the people they target and on whom their help is focused.

Of the 1,700 almhouse charities throughout the country, more than 30% occupy listed buildings, and many have celebrated anniversaries of over 400 years. Such anniversaries are important to record and acknowledge. Another feature of their rich heritage is that many almhouses lie in the heart of towns and villages, which ensures that they remain closely integrated in the local community. It is important to recognise the added benefit of their location, which ensures that residents are close to shops and services. In other words, they are in the right places and have the right focus in local communities.

The majority of today’s almhouse residents will be of retirement age and of limited financial means, and will have lived in the vicinity of an almhouse charity. Residents pay a weekly maintenance contribution, which is similar to rent but different in law, and less than a commercial rate. I hope the Minister will be able to respond to the concerns raised by the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster on the specific circumstances of almhouse residents.

Almshouses make a real difference to the quality of the lives of their patrons. The House must recognise that and make the appropriate allowances. They help to fill a gap, which is why I support the representations made by the right hon. Gentleman and others on the Government’s intention to cap housing benefit entitlement for residents at local housing allowance rates and the requirement to reduce rent levels by 1% each year for four years from April 2016.

I am given to understand that, as a general rule, the rents charged for supported housing are higher than the rents charged on other social housing units. Thus the impact of capping housing benefit entitlement for residents of supported housing has caused particular concern, which is the reason for the debate. The whole point of these charities is to provide the additional care and support that is needed, and capping housing benefit in this way will make things even less affordable for those who need a little help to feel a little safer in their community, or even to stay in the community in the specific place where they are living.

About 17% of older people are in contact with their family, friends and neighbours less than once a week and 11% are in contact with them less than once a month. These figures underline the need for consideration—perhaps special consideration—of almshouses. Two fifths of older people say that television is their main company; for some older people, it is their only company. When there are so few community hubs, it affects the quality of life of almhouse residents, so almshouses should be protected.

It is a well-known fact that residential care is an expensive business. It is my belief that this cap will be a false economy, as it may leave some people feeling that they have no other option than to go into a home. For those who do not have a large pension, which will include those who benefit from almshouses, the cost of their going into a home will be met by the taxpayer.

With respect, I do not see any great saving in this change. I am sure that the Minister, when he responds to the debate, will say that that is not the case, but in my 31 years of representing the general public in an elected capacity, I have seen too many cases where the refusal to put a care package in place has led to people being put in residential care, at a much greater cost and causing much greater difficulty for those people physically, emotionally and financially. That must be taken into consideration.

I conclude by saying that our elderly people need help and consideration, and I feel that these proposals to cap housing benefit are not necessary or useful in any way, shape or form at this time. Therefore, I fully support my colleague and right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster, if I can call him that, in bringing forward this matter for consideration in this House, and I look to the Minister for a positive response. We have a duty in this House to help those who need help, and legislatively we can help them. Let us hope we can do that as a result of this debate.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): I do not think that we have any other speakers from the Floor, so we will move to the wind-ups.
9.51 am

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mrs Gillan.

I start by thanking the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field) for securing this interesting and informed debate. While I have always taken an interest in housing issues in general throughout my political career—I started as a councillor in West Lothian many years ago—and in supported accommodation in particular, I must admit that prior to this debate being announced I was unaware of almshouses. I suspect that that will not be uncommon among the general public and indeed among other MPs.

My research shows that there appear to be only two almshouses charities in Scotland: the John Menzies (Southern) Limited Employees’ Benevolent Fund, which is based in Edinburgh; and the Ellen Carter Almshouses charity, which is based in Hawick. Both of them are outwith my area, but I will do more research to find out about them after this debate.

As was shown by the examples given by other right hon. and hon. Members during the debate, almshouses clearly play a valuable role. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) said, they give us compassion and charity, which are two key aspects that should not be outwith the housing market at all; indeed, they are the basis for providing homes for people.

The Scottish National party is pleased that the UK Government have abandoned plans to reduce the housing benefit for vulnerable people who stay in supported accommodation, which would obviously include almshouses and women’s aid refuges, which is another form of accommodation that is particularly important to me.

Local housing allowance rates do not consider the additional cost to refuge providers or other providers of supported accommodation of leasing accommodation from social landlords, nor the associated service charge costs. If they had not received the existing level of housing benefit to cover their costs, refuges may have been forced to close.

It is estimated that 62% of housing association tenants in Scotland rely on housing benefit to help them to pay their rent, which highlights just how significant housing benefit is. I am delighted that the cuts from the application of LHA rates to supported accommodation over the 2016-17 to 2019-20 period will not be made. I congratulate the Government on taking that stance. Instead, we are told by the UK Government that from 2019-20 onwards they will introduce in relation to England “a new funding model which will ensure that the sector continues to be funded at current levels”.

I welcome that because obviously it will result in additional funding being given to the Scottish Government to support the supported accommodation sector.

In the last Scottish Parliament, the Scottish Government exceeded their target of building 30,000 affordable homes by completing 33,490 affordable homes, with 22,523 of those completions being of social rented homes. Building more homes has been made a national infrastructure priority by the SNP Government. Over the course of the next Scottish Parliament, the SNP Government will build 50,000 new affordable homes, 35,000 of which we have pledged to make social rented homes. Ensuring that everyone in Scotland has access to good-quality housing is a vital part of the Scottish Government’s drive to ensure economic growth, promote social justice, strengthen communities and tackle inequality.

The Scottish Government have a number of innovative schemes for funding and building more of these homes. So far, we are the only UK Administration to invest in charitable bonds—more than £40 million has been invested in charitable bonds, providing the development finance for 581 affordable homes and generating more than £9 million for charities. I wonder whether that is an example of an approach to housing funding that could perhaps benefit almshouses throughout the wider UK and indeed throughout Scotland, because, as I have said, we have only two almshouses charities at the moment.

The Local Affordable Rented Housing Trust is another scheme. It is helping to provide 1,000 affordable homes across Scotland. Launched in October last year, it was set up to provide long-term, mid-market rented housing across the country. Overall funding for the LAR will be more than £100 million, with a loan of £55 million from the Scottish Government being matched by private investors. We also have the National Housing Trust initiative, which was launched in 2010. It was the first Government guarantee-backed housing programme in the UK.

As well as building more homes, which is absolutely fundamental, the right to buy was abolished for all social housing tenants in Scotland by the Housing (Scotland) Act 2014. That will preserve housing stock for the future and means that social landlords will receive a steady rental income. It also allows landlords to issue short secure Scottish tenancies to address antisocial behaviour and help homeowners in genuine need.

In conclusion, while almshouses clearly have a significant role within the housing policy model, in the Scottish context they are currently relatively minor. However, there is definitely more that can be done. More knowledge of almshouses would be useful—I would certainly be interested in joining the all-party group on almshouses because it is an interesting approach. The comment was made that we can have more modern almshouses. That could fit in with different funding models and provide a valuable social context.

I thank the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster for securing this debate and I am delighted to have been able to take part.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Mrs Gillan, in my first debate on the Front Bench.

I congratulate the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field) on securing this debate and thank him for the courtesy of sharing with me in advance what he was going to cover. This is not the first time that he and I have spoken about housing issues in London in this Chamber, even in the short time I have been in Parliament. I also thank the Almshouses Association for its briefing for this debate and welcome the formation of the all-party group on almshouses, under the co-chairmanship of the right hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch).
As the right hon. Gentleman described so eloquently, almshouses have been around for centuries—long before the advent of council and housing association housing—and, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) clearly described, they continue to play a valuable role in the provision of housing in this country. They particularly benefit people such as pensioners and people with disabilities, those on low incomes, and occasionally members of other specific groups, such as ex-services personnel. In my constituency we have several almshouses. The Isleworth and Hounslow Charity manages 80 units, spread over six sites, for couples and single people. It is an amalgamation of a number of small almshouses and distributive charities. The oldest, Ingrams, was endowed in 1664; the newest, Tolson House, which is part-funded by the Homes and Communities Agency, was opened in 2012.

One of the strengths of almshouses is their local connection. They often have local trustees and many provide on-site staff, a social focus and a support element. In addition to the human side of providing homes, the older almshouse charities preserve an important part of our nation’s built heritage. So while almshouses may be historic, they are very much alive and vibrant and play an important role in the mixed housing economy in our communities, particularly for those who cannot afford to buy their own homes.

Before I address the specific points raised by the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster, I want to set the place of almshouses within the wider context of all supported and social rent housing. We have seen six years of failure, leading to the greatest housing crisis this country has seen for many decades. Housebuilding is at the lowest level under any Prime Minister since 1923. Rough sleeping has doubled. Private rents have risen faster than incomes. The number of new Government-funded social rented homes has fallen by an astonishing 98% since 2010, and housing benefit has risen by more than £4 billion a year in cash terms despite a series of punitive cuts. The pressures on all providers of supported and social rent housing could not be more difficult, and almshouses have not been spared.

Having set the scene, I would now like to turn to each of the points that the right hon. Gentleman raised. First, on the issue of licensing, he seeks a statutory instrument to exempt almshouses from the relevant legislation. Local authorities have discretion over fees and the licensing regime, which is there to catch rogue private landlords. I am sure that almshouses are able to work with their local authority to ensure that the licensing regime does not bring them into the ambit of something meant for a completely different purpose. However, I understand that there are some set categories for exemptions that almshouses have to follow and that presumably do not include non-registered almshouses. That is the reason for the concern that the right hon. Gentleman expressed. If he is suggesting that local authorities should have more discretion than at present to amend who is covered by the licensing regime, we would have some sympathy with that.

Secondly, on the national planning policy framework and planning obligations, the right hon. Gentleman says that some local authorities have interpreted non-registered almshouses as essentially being private developers that are therefore required to carry out section 106 obligations to provide affordable housing when that is essentially what their core business is anyway. It could and indeed should be a matter for local negotiation. Section 106 agreements are locally negotiated and agreed. Having spent some years as the chair of my local authority’s planning committee and many years as a planning committee member, I am well acquainted with the powers of the planning system and the ability to have local discretion according to local circumstances and need. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that some clarity and guidance on this area from the Department would perhaps be helpful to almshouses and planning authorities. We need to deliver much needed affordable housing more urgently. We share the belief of the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) in the importance of delivering many more good quality, truly affordable homes, and soon.

Thirdly, the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster raised concerns from almshouses that the rent cut for social rent housing might impact on almshouses once the first-year exemption is over. Opposition Members regret that the arbitrary rent cut has potentially compromised the building of new affordable homes and damaged the relationship between providers and the Government. It has led to plans for the development of new affordable housing being scaled back at a time when there have been devastating cuts in social housing investment since 2010.

Finally, the shadow Secretary of State for Housing, my right hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), has led opposition to the cuts to the local housing allowance for supported housing since last December. It is dangerous and damaging to cap housing support for some of the most vulnerable people and to uprate it by a measure of inflation—the consumer prices index—that explicitly excludes housing costs. The National Almshouses Association is not alone in expressing concern about the Government’s plans to introduce a cap on the amount of rent that housing benefit will cover. It will mean that housing benefit for social sector tenants cannot be higher than the local housing allowance rate for private rent tenants.

The measure was due to apply to tenancies signed after 1 April 2016 and to come into force from 1 April 2018 onwards for everyone else. However, in March, following pressure from the shadow Front-Bench team, the Government announced a one-year exemption for tenants of supported housing. In July, my shadow Front-Bench colleagues secured an Opposition day debate in which they called on the Government to fully exempt supported housing from their cuts to housing benefit and to consult with supported housing providers to identify ways in which all vulnerable people who need supported housing can access it.

In September, immediately before the conference recess, the Government announced through a written statement that they would be deferring the application of LHA rates to social rents for supported housing further, until 2019-20. However, the Government will be going ahead with the cut to supported housing providers from next April. The written statement raised more questions than it answered. The policy is delayed, but the cuts will go ahead. There is no figure on the new funding pledged, yet the Budget scored the so-called savings at £990 million.
Furthermore, Government announcements on the LHA cut have stalled the development of many new supported housing schemes.

I am concerned that the Government decision to delay detailing their cuts to supported housing will leave tens of thousands of the most vulnerable people without the certainty they need to live their lives. The written statement lacked important details on the top-up funding that will be devolved to local authorities and on the new funding arrangements. The continuous delays in outlining a complete package of support for almshouses and, indeed, the whole supported housing sector are unacceptable. It is vital that supported housing is fully exempt from these cuts. Otherwise, as the hon. Member for Strangford has so clearly explained, we risk pushing more pensioners into the far more costly care system.

In conclusion, almshouses, along with all providers of social and affordable housing, deserve to be treated by this Government with the same degree of respect as they afford their residents.

10.6 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I welcome the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) to the Opposition Front Bench. I start by congratulating my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mark Field) on securing this important debate on almshouses. He has a great passion for housing issues, particularly in relation to London. I welcome the opportunity to highlight the important role that almshouses have played for many years and, as we have heard, centuries. They continue to play that role in providing affordable housing for communities across the country.

The creation of the new all-party group on almshouses rightly reflects the importance of these organisations, and I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his new role as co-chair of the all-party group. I understand it had its inaugural meeting on 14 September. The group has a remit to promote the issues affecting almshouse charities and their continuance, development and strengthening throughout the UK. This debate is an excellent start to the all-party group’s work, and I congratulate my right hon. Friend and commend him on his efforts on behalf of the wider almshouse movement.

The tremendous dedication and work of the trustees and other volunteers who run and maintain these important organisations are fine examples of community spirit and localism that directly impacts the lives of residents. As a former leader of Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council, I am aware and proud of the huge contribution that the Nicholas Chamberlaine Trusts’ almshouses have made to Bedworth in the neighbouring constituency of North Warwickshire since 1840. The almshouses were designed by the notable Victorian architect Thomas Larkins Walker to house the poor of the town. The charity was established in 1715 as part of a bequest by Nicholas Chamberlaine, who was the rector of Bedworth for 51 years. With 28 homes still housing those in need, it is clear that this almshouse trust and others across the country continue to play a most valuable role in supporting vulnerable residents, particularly in many rural areas, as my right hon. Friend detailed. As he noted, almshouses also make a critical contribution to our national heritage by maintaining many listed, important and fine buildings that might otherwise be neglected.

On the points made by my right hon. Friend and other hon. Members about the legislation affecting almshouses, the Government have listened carefully to the concerns raised by almshouses that are registered providers of social housing about the potential impact of requiring them to implement the 1% per annum social rent reduction set out in the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016. This important measure reduces housing benefit costs in the social rented sector in England, which had increased by 25% over the previous decade. However, we recognised that there were particular circumstances that could make it more challenging for almshouses to absorb this reduction. We therefore announced last month that the one-year exemption that had previously been granted would be extended for the full four years of the social rent reduction. I can reassure my right hon. Friend that regulations to that effect will be in place shortly.

We also recognised that the application of the local housing allowance rate might have a bigger impact on almshouses and other specific types of housing. We announced last month that we will extend the deferral until 2019-20 while we consider whether any additional arrangements will be necessary for this group, alongside the new funding model for supported housing that will then be introduced. These decisions have been warmly welcomed by the Almshouse Association.

On the LHA rates, I can reassure the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), who may have seen our statement that was laid before the House, that our solution for supported housing includes a commitment to provide the same quantum of funding as at present, which is an extremely important point.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster also raised the issue of selective licensing. Licensing is intended to apply to most private landlords operating in a particular area, including registered charities. It is intended to raise standards in the private sector and provide a level playing field between landlords. Around 20% of almshouses are registered providers of social housing and, as my right hon. Friend said, are therefore exempt from licensing since they are subject to other regulatory controls. The remainder, although almost exclusively registered charities, are private landlords. The Government are not convinced that there is a compelling case for those providers to be treated differently from other private landlords operating in areas that are subject to selective licensing.

I am grateful for the Almshouse Association’s response to our consultation paper on extending the licensing of houses in multiple occupation, in which they raised particular concerns about licence fees payable under selective licensing schemes. We published our response to the consultation yesterday. Local housing authorities can charge fees to cover their costs in administering a selective licensing scheme. The Government do not regulate the fees that are charged. However, it is important to recognise that the fees must be reasonable and transparent, and, in particular, should cover only the cost of running the scheme: they should not raise additional revenue above and beyond that.
Mark Field: My concern is that those fees are a pretty strong disincentive for new or existing almshouse providers to expand in areas—often the most vulnerable areas—where there is a big acute need for social housing. Everyone wants to ensure that rogue landlords are properly brought to book, but the licensing fees are substantial. The sorts of almshouse charities that we are talking about may have only a dozen or so properties under their auspices. Given that it is meant to be a small number of areas that have licensing arrangements, almshouse charities might think twice about continuing to undertake their work in areas of acute social need. That would be a regrettable and unintended consequence of what is being proposed.

Mr Jones: My right hon. Friend is probably aware of a Government White Paper on housing, which I will talk about in more detail in a moment, that will be published shortly. I am sure that he will feed his further concerns into the work that the Government are conducting.

Exempting almshouses from fees and offering substantial discounts is within local authorities’ discretion. As the legislation stands, providers can speak to their local authorities about licensing fees and whether the local authority is willing to give an exemption or a discount. Before a local authority introduces a licensing scheme, the legislation requires them to take reasonable steps to consult organisations that are likely to be affected by the designation, and they must consider any representations made in accordance with the consultation. I would encourage almshouses and other private landlords to put their case to local authorities at that stage.

Mark Field: All of us would like local authorities to have as much discretion as possible, but we have to be realistic when it comes to the charging of fees. Given the financial constraints that all local authorities are under, it is unlikely that a local authority will exercise much discretion when faced with the prospect of losing substantial fees. I am afraid the Minister has not provided as much comfort as I would like, but I take on board his point that we can make full representations as part and parcel of the White Paper process. Almshouses do not have a special status, but they are recognised as an important part of the broader ecosystem, and some of the understandable protections required for tenants and local authorities alike should not necessarily apply, given the historic importance of almshouses, in contrast to the rogue landlords that much of the legislation is designed to try to deal with.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): As we have plenty of time, I am being generous, but I remind Members that interventions are supposed to be short.

Mr Marcus Jones: My right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster has made several points, and he can feed those into the housing White Paper process.

On the national planning policy framework, which was mentioned, there was a consultation last December on changes to the framework, with a view to increasing the supply of housing. Any changes that will be made in the framework will be undertaken through the White Paper process. Again, I encourage my right hon. Friend and other hon. Members to feed into that. The impact and implementation of section 106 agreements will again be looked at in the forthcoming housing White Paper, and I encourage my right hon. Friend to look into that.

I was a little disappointed by some of the comments made by the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth in the wider context of housing, because her party presided over the lowest ever level of house building in 2009. House building has picked up significantly since then. From 1997 to 2010, the stock of affordable homes in this country fell by 420,000. Since 2010, the coalition Government and the current Government have created 293,000 affordable homes. In this Parliament, we are continuing that, with a programme for another 100,000 affordable homes to rent. During the 13 years that they were in power, the Labour Government built fewer council houses than this Government have in the last six and a half years.

Ruth Cadbury: Perhaps the Minister could explain something relating to the net gain or loss of social rented housing since 2010. In my area, the right-to-buy discount is so high that council houses have been sold through right to buy at a faster rate than new social rented housing, both council and housing association, has been built by our local authority. On his comment about the number of council houses built under the last Labour Government, it is true that council house building was low, but housing association new builds were very high. We also delivered the better homes programme, in which a high proportion of council homes were brought up to the decent homes standard—they had been neglected for many years before that.

Mrs Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Order. I do not wish Members to slip into bad habits just because we have a reasonable amount of time.

Mr Marcus Jones: It is quite obvious that the number of affordable homes declined steeply during the period of the last Labour Government. We are trying to address that, as well as the legacy of the biggest financial crash in living memory, which has caused significant challenges in bringing forward new homes. We are now on the right trajectory.

It is clear that in this Chamber we all share the same appreciation, respect and admiration for the almshouse movement and its volunteers. I look forward to continuing to work with that movement and my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster, and his colleagues on the APPG. We recognise the value of almshouses, and the support that they provide, and the crucial work that they do, in many of our communities, and are keen to see that continue.
I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his contribution about the view from the other side of the Irish sea. On Scotland, I am sorry that there are relatively few almshouses in Scotland. Mischievously, I might wonder whether there was no great tradition of philanthropy in Scotland; more to the point, it may be that, with a different legal system, housing tenure developed in a different way north of the border. As the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day) rightly pointed out, there are some almshouses in Scotland.

I know this is not exactly my party’s policy, but I agree with the SNP view that we need to ensure that increasing amounts of social housing—this would certainly apply to almshouses—should not be subject to right to buy. One way that we will encourage people—philanthropists, as I have said—to put money into the sector and get into it in a big way is if they are assured that the properties will not be subject to right to buy and that those charitable measures will be maintained in perpetuity.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) on her debut. I think she will find that this particular debate was rather more consensual than some of the more fractious outings she will get in future in her role. There is some merit in making sure that all parties are aware of speeches in advance, and I would always advise colleagues to do it, particularly in these sorts of Westminster Hall debates, because it enables us to address the issues. I am sure the hon. Lady recognises, as another central London MP, going down Sutton Lane and other parts of her constituency where there are almshouses, that they are very much sought after and remain an important part of her community.

Finally, I thank the Minister. It was very useful to be able to put my speech forward in advance. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow) for doing her dutiful work as the Parliamentary Private Secretary and making sure the papers got passed on. I have found comfort in much of what the Minister said. There are one or two issues that we will have to look at again, but I hope the work of the APPG and the association will play an important part in ensuring that almshouses are not a forgotten Cinderella area in the housing White Paper, but are in the mind of the Ministry going forward.

Mrs Gillan, thank you so much for allowing us to speak at length, albeit not at as much length as we thought we were going to. That gives you a quick half hour for coffee as well, which is a perfect solution for a Wednesday morning.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered almshouses and their role in housing policy.

10.25 am

Sitting suspended.

Glenfield Hospital Children’s Heart Surgery Unit

Liz Kendall (Leicester West) (Lab): I beg to move, That this House has considered the future of Glenfield Hospital’s Children’s Heart Surgery Unit.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. The future of Glenfield’s children’s heart surgery unit is a hugely important issue not only for my constituents and patients in the east midlands but for people across the country—Glenfield currently serves patients from 296 parliamentary constituencies. The Minister will know that 34,000 people have signed an online petition to save the unit, and I understand that many thousands more have signed the paper petition. That shows the strength of local feeling.

Like the hospital, I support NHS England’s desire to achieve the highest possible standards for children’s heart surgery across the country. NHS England’s standards rightly state that it must be able to “reserve the right not to commission services from a provider that is so significantly at variance from the standards as to cause safety/quality concerns. Such a decision would only be taken following a risk assessment of the costs and benefits of both closure and non-closure.”

However, there is no evidence that Glenfield is at significant variance from the standards—in fact, quite the opposite. According to independent assessments, Glenfield has among the best clinical outcomes in the country, including for mortality rates and readmission rates, which are significantly lower than those in other centres. Clinicians at Glenfield rightly say that it makes no sense to close a centre that is already achieving precisely the good clinical outcomes NHS England wants.

Sir Edward Garnier (Harborough) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on achieving this debate, which continues the public debate we have been having in the county and the city in respect of the hospital. Does she agree that the hospital and its children’s heart unit not only has a regional and national reputation of the highest order but is a world centre of excellence, and for it to be closed or for any of its services to be decreased would be little short of wanton destruction? I urge her to urge the Minister to take that message firmly back to his Department.

Liz Kendall: I completely agree with the right hon. and learned Gentleman. I am sure that not only the 57 patients from his constituency who are currently receiving treatment but the thousands of patients who receive ongoing care, including for extracorporeal membrane oxygenation, which I will come back to, rightly value the high standards at Glenfield. It would be a huge and terrible mistake to close the centre.

In a recent letter to the hospital, NHS England raised concerns that more complex cases are being referred to Birmingham from Glenfield. I take issue with that. I would like the Minister to confirm that, in fact, only four such cases have been referred to Birmingham in the past three years, and that it is a professional obligation to seek second opinions when that is in the best interests of patients. That is enshrined in General Medical Council good practice guidelines and was recommended by the
paediatric and congenital services review group in its recommendations in 2003. Few complex cases are referred but, when they are, it is in the best interests of patients. That should not be used as a reason to close the unit.

A second part of the standards that NHS England has set out is ensuring that sustainable numbers of children have surgery in each unit every year. The aim is to have 375 operations per year over the next three years, with 500 a year in the longer run. I want to make this clear: the hospital has told me and NHS England that it is on track for 375 cases this year and that, if it does not quite achieve that, it will not be by significant numbers. It therefore rightly asks: “Why put a centre on track to reach those standards at risk by this proposal?”

On the longer term goal of achieving 500 cases a year, there is an important question. More than 500 children in the east midlands need congenital heart surgery every year but do not all go to Glenfield. NHS England claims that that is due to patient choice. Some patients in Peterborough or Northampton will choose to go to places such as Great Ormond Street, but the claim that all patients in Northampton choose to go to Great Ormond Street while all patients from Peterborough choose to go to Leicester suggests the goals are more about historic referral patterns than about genuine patient choice.

Gloria De Piero (Ashfield) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for raising the debate and for all the campaigning she is doing on this important issue. I could raise many constituency cases, but I will raise just one. Scarlett from Kirkby was minutes from dying by the time she arrived at Glenfield. Her mum, Zoë, told me that she would not have made it any further than Glenfield. Keeping Glenfield open is a matter of life and death for so many children.

Liz Kendall: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have to think about people’s needs in the round—the need for high-quality surgery; ongoing care and support; and, critically, help for those families for whom this is a terrible, frightening and ongoing experience. Making the east midlands the only place without a heart surgery unit does not make sense.

It does not have to be this way. In its own standards, NHS England says:

“Networks will need to establish systems to ensure that referrals...between centres are managed in such a way as to ensure that each clinician is able to achieve their numbers”.

Its own standards say that people need to work together so that everyone can achieve the best. However, at the moment NHS England is not developing the work. I am a long-standing champion of patient choice, but the current proposals deny choice to patients from across the country who use Glenfield children’s heart surgery unit on an ongoing basis.

Edward Argar (Charnwood) (Con): I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for securing this important debate. The Glenfield children’s heart unit is vital not only to my constituents but, as she said, to people across the east midlands and beyond. She has alluded to the significant progress that the hospital has made in just the past year in driving up the number of referrals and operations. That significant progress gives me confidence that it is on track to meet its target. Will she join me in urging the Minister to press NHS England to pause, look at the excellent clinical outcomes and the progress on increasing referral numbers, and think again, to keep this hugely important children’s heart unit open?

Liz Kendall: The hon. Gentleman makes an extremely important point. The clinicians at the unit and the hospital bosses have striven continually to improve patient care. They are not complacent for a second. They bust a gut to keep making improvements. Those improvements will, I am sure, be recognised and acknowledged by the 58 patients in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency who are receiving continuing care at Glenfield. He is right to say that NHS England needs to look in
detail at the improvements that have been and are being made. When NHS England came to the centre in September—I was more than a little disappointed that it had not made a visit before it launched its proposals to close the unit—it found that some of its perceptions were wrong.

One important standard for improving care is co-locating—bringing together, in other words—the different children’s services, which includes not just surgery but other heart support, paediatric intensive care and wider services available to children. NHS England initially marked Glenfield down for not having plans to co-locate services. I am afraid that that was completely and utterly wrong. On coming to the centre it discovered that there are indeed such plans. I would like the Minister to confirm that University Hospitals of Leicester trust has plans to complete the co-location of all the services before April 2019, and has secured all the capital budget necessary to build its new children’s services hospital. To put all that at risk when the hospital is trying to improve services would be a big mistake.

Finally, I want to discuss the impact on other services in Leicester and the region of closing the children’s heart surgery unit. It is extremely important. As I said earlier, NHS England has itself said that it would not put forward proposals to close the unit unless it had done a risk assessment of the costs and benefits, including the knock-on effect on other services. It has not yet done that. I am concerned about two services in particular. Glenfield has a world-leading extracorporeal membrane oxygenation service. Essentially, if someone has a weak heart and needs surgery on it, ECMO enables oxygen to be pumped back into the blood during the operation. Glenfield’s is only the second ECMO service in the world to treat more than 2,000 patients. It conducts 50% of the entire ECMO activity in the UK. It also has the country’s only national patient transport service enabling people who need ECMO to be transferred swiftly from anywhere in the country to Glenfield. The huge benefits of that service were seen during recent flu crises.

Lilian Greenwood: I thank my hon. Friend for being so generous in giving way again. My constituent, Alice Parker, was born at Queen’s Medical Centre 17 years ago. Her condition was so grave that her mum, Vicki, was told to expect the worst, but thanks to the expertise of staff at Glenfield who provide ECMO, Alice is now studying for her A-levels at Bilborough College and hoping to go to university to study biochemistry. Vicki describes the centre as “a true national treasure”, but actually, as my hon. Friend has said, it is an international treasure and it is vital that we do not lose the service.

Liz Kendall: I know the hon. Member for South Leicestershire (Alberto Costa) would have spoken up on behalf of the 94 patients in his constituency who are receiving ongoing care and support.

It is a miracle that Glenfield is providing such incredible standards of care when it has been under the cloud of uncertainty for so many years. It makes no sense to leave the east midlands as the only region in the country without a children’s heart surgery unit, or to put at risk a world-leading ECMO unit and a vital, high-quality paediatric intensive care unit that supports millions of patients across the midlands and the eastern region.

The Government must think again. They must look in detail at the current evidence from the hospital about its outcomes; they must listen to the views of patients;
and they must balance all of those issues—high-quality surgery, ongoing care and support, the knock-on effect on other services and whether other units in the country would be able to treat all those extra patients before they have made huge improvements, which will take time. It does not make sense. It does not have to be this way. We can work together to save the unit and improve care for everybody.

11.20 am

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr Philip Dunne): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Gillan. I congratulate the hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall) on securing the debate and on speaking with such evident passion and knowledge on the subject. I think she has impressed us all with her grasp of the issues. I also congratulate all other hon. Members, from both sides of the House, who managed to secure an intervention during her speech. They made their points clear, with some personal testimony from constituents who have used these facilities, and also made clear how important it is to the region of the whole, in their eyes, that the facility continues.

The future of congenital heart disease services at Glenfield hospital is an important subject, not just regionally but as part of the national plan to ensure that we have world-class heart facilities for infants and children in this country. It is a matter that has been around for some time, and I understand the point the hon. Lady and others made about how unsettling the uncertainty around the future of services is for the dedicated staff who work in those units. It is appropriate that we try to bring these discussions to a head in an orderly, thoughtful and timely way, so that that is not prolonged.

It is worth emphasising that NHS England’s review is about ensuring that CHD services are delivered with high quality and that they are consistent and sustainable for the future. The common standards, which have been agreed by clinicians, other experts and patients, are the driving force to make sure every patient benefits from the same excellent care. It is worth reminding hon. Members present that the proposals for changes to adult and children’s congenital heart services at Glenfield and the other centres across the country are at present just that: proposals. They are not final decisions. NHS England will be consulting on the proposals in the coming months, so it is not appropriate for me to respond in detail to all the concerns raised here today.

The hon. Member for Leicester West asked some specific questions, some of which I will be able to address but most of which, I regret to say, I will not. Those will be drawn out when we come to the consultation, so that the points she made about the current performance of the hospital can be brought to attention through the consultation process.

Liz Kendall: I am soon to meet the Minister at the Department of Health. If he is not able to answer the specific questions I have raised, perhaps he can come back to me on those issues at that meeting next month.

Mr Dunne: The hon. Lady has put her points on the record. I will be able to respond to some next month, but some will be part of the consultation, which we anticipate will get under way in the new year.

I am trying to put this in context, particularly in relation to the amount of time that we have been considering how to create excellent centres of congenital heart surgery for children across the country, which has been the subject of concern for more than 20 years. Clinical experts and national parent groups have repeatedly called for change, and there has long been an overwhelming feeling that change is needed. Added to that is the fact that children’s heart surgery has become ever more complex and technically demanding. Surgeons now operate on babies who may be only hours old, which demands a highly-skilled and technical team of doctors and nurses who maintain those skills through regular practice. That is why standards are being progressively raised for each surgeon over time, as the hon. Lady referred to.

As I am sure everyone involved in the Glenfield debate is aware, the process of consultation began quite a long time ago. A Safe and Sustainable review was launched in 2008 by the Department of Health under the previous Labour Administration—of which the hon. Lady was a member—to start addressing these issues. The decisions that came out of that review were challenged in court, via referral to the Secretary of State and subsequently to the independent reconfiguration panel. As a result of those challenges, the Safe and Sustainable review was halted. Responsibility for reviewing children’s CHD services was then handed to NHS England, which decided that its new review of those services would also encompass services for adults.

NHS England’s review team consulted extensively with patients and their families, clinicians and other experts before publishing the new standards for CHD services, which only came into effect in April this year. Hospital trusts providing CHD services were then asked to assess themselves against those standards and report back on their plans to meet the standards within the set timeframes. In July this year, following those assessments and further verification with providers, NHS England announced its proposals for change.

In the case of Glenfield, NHS England is minded to work with University Hospitals of Leicester to safely transfer CHD surgical and interventional cardiology services from there to appropriate alternative hospitals. The rationale for that is that NHS England is currently of the view that Glenfield does not meet the standards to be a centre for surgery and interventional cardiology, and is unlikely to do so in the future. The hon. Lady eloquently expressed her belief, presumably based on conversations with the hospitals and with clinicians, that they are on track to meet those standards. That will be important evidence to make available to the consultation, and I am sure that she and other hon. and right hon. Members will do so over the months of the consultation. NHS England’s assessment is based on information provided by the trust itself about surgical numbers, surgeons and their expertise, and which specialist services are located together. It has not come from the centre; it has come from the trust itself.

There is no plan to close Glenfield as a provider of CHD services, other than in relation to surgery. NHS England is instead proposing to continue to commission specialist medical services that make up much of the pre and post-surgical care required by people with congenital heart disease. Closing the medical services for CHD at the hospital is not mentioned under any of the proposals. That has understandably prompted much concern,
including the impact that such a transfer might have on issues such as children’s extracorporeal membrane oxygenation—ECMO—services and paediatric intensive care services, as the hon. Member for Leicester West identified. As I understand it, when the review was undertaken in 2008, Glenfield was not only the first hospital in the country providing ECMO services but was the leading hospital. There were not many others. Today there are five centres offering ECMO services, so Glenfield is not in quite as strong a position as it was a few years ago.

The hon. Lady referred to the petition on Glenfield and the many hundreds of thousands of people who have signed it, which demonstrates the strength of public support for maintaining the service. It shows how passionately people feel about these issues and their strong desire to defend their local services. At this stage I reiterate to those people that no final decisions have been made. We need to wait and see what comes from the next stage of the process, and I am sure the petitioners will make their views known during that. I appreciate that hon. Members may be frustrated that I cannot answer all their questions at this stage. The hon. Member for Leicester West has referred to the meeting we will have in the coming weeks. I look forward to that and to attempting to answer some of her questions.

I remind hon. Members that this is not about cutting costs—that allegation has not been made by anyone during the debate, which I appreciate. It is about trying to improve the standard of service for some of the most sick infants and children in the country, and to ensure that we have a robust, sustainable pattern of expertise in a slightly smaller number of hospitals. Precisely where we get to in deciding which hospitals should provide those services in future will come through the consultation that will take place. The intent is for a formal, three-month public consultation that will conclude in the spring, with decisions being made next summer. I am sure all hon. and right hon. Members present will participate in that debate and I look forward to hearing their contributions.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.
and literacy levels are well below the national average. That is why the schools rightly place a great emphasis on literacy and numeracy. I contacted the Liverpool Primary Heads and Head teachers Association ahead of today’s debate, to ask its members for some thoughts. They expressed a number of fears that they wanted me to share with the Minister. They fear that the new assessment framework in primary schools might increase the likelihood that teachers are teaching to the test. Their fear is that we are not sufficiently recognising the great progress made in our primary schools, as well as rightly looking at the outcomes. They have a significant concern—of course, this is not only in my constituency—about recruitment of school leaders in the primary sector. In particular, they mentioned recruitment and retention of newly qualified teachers and subject specialists in our primary schools.

We have a fantastic set of special schools in my constituency. Two weeks ago, I met students from Sandfield Park School in my constituency to discuss the future of education in Liverpool. That was part of a superb initiative by the Liverpool Schools Parliament, which gives a real voice to children and young people in the city of Liverpool. I would like to mention Jeff Dunn, the council officer who leads that great initiative.

Whenever I visit schools and colleges, one of the issues that comes up most consistently is information, advice and guidance, and in particular what is available for those in the 14 to 19 age range. There are issues of quality, consistency and impartiality. Availability of good information, advice and guidance is crucial at both 14 and 16. It is particularly important that we address this issue for those who are not going down the A-level route. That issue has been raised with me by colleagues in further education and by the excellent university technical college and studio school in Liverpool.

There is a school in my constituency that I have mentioned before, and I mention it again today because it is an example of best practice. Cardinal Heenan Catholic High School provides superb advice and guidance from age 11. It issues year 7 students with a passport, which is updated through their years at school. It has industry days, where people from different occupations are invited to come in and talk to the boys so that they can learn about potential occupations. That is a fine example, but sadly it is still too rare. Will the Minister tell us what the Government are doing to encourage and spread best practice across the board in information, advice and guidance?

Connected to that, we still have not got the issue of high-quality technical, practical and vocational education right in this country. I see great work in the City of Liverpool College, in the Alt Valley Community Trust and its North Liverpool Community College in my constituency, but whenever I talk to leaders in further education and in technical and practical education, they talk about spending cuts in FE and uncertainty—for example, about the implementation of the apprenticeship levy.

I am keen that the most academic students have the best opportunities they can. Last year, I established the Liverpool to Oxbridge Collaborative. I am working with eight local secondary schools, to ensure that the most academically able students have the information and advice they need, and that they have the opportunity to visit Oxford and Cambridge and get help with their applications and interviews. I have been struck by the enthusiasm that the students who have been identified to be part of the project have shown, by the amazing support they have had from their parents and by the commitment of the schools and teachers to it. The goal is simple: the most academic pupil at a comprehensive school in my constituency in north Liverpool should have the same chance to get into our best universities as students at the top private schools. They will get the full support if they make that choice.

Of course, education is not only about young people. Lifelong learning is critical. I am struck in my constituency and across Merseyside at the positive work that trade unions do in promoting education—for example, via Unionlearn, the Trades Union Congress learning and skills organisation. I am also proud to be a patron of the Workers Educational Association, which does fantastic work in Liverpool and across the country.

In 2012, the Mayor of Liverpool, Joe Anderson, set up an education commission. He invited my noble Friend, Estelle Morris, to chair that commission, and its report, “From Better to Best”, was published a year later. Over the last two decades, we have seen a significant improvement in the quality and results of schools across Liverpool. GCSE performance has moved from well below national average to much closer to it, reaching a peak in 2012 of 56.8% of students achieving at least five A* to C grades including English and maths. However, those results started to fall back after 2012, to 48.6% last year. I am encouraged by the provisional results this year. We have turned the corner, with Liverpool schools’ results going up to 51% this year. That is still below the national average but it is an improvement on last year.

A lot has been done since the Mayor’s commission. The Liverpool learning partnership is a very exciting innovation that recently gained charitable status. It is a membership organisation, and its members are the schools of Liverpool. Almost every single school is a member, including academies and free schools and the further education college. It is taking forward a number of programmes, such as “City of Readers”, which takes up the challenge that Estelle Morris set to make Liverpool the UK’s foremost reading city; “Liverpool Counts”, which seeks to focus on numeracy; and the new cultural education partnership. The aim is to work with schools, local authorities and School Improvement Liverpool. It is an excellent example of collaboration and I urge the Minister to study the strengths and achievements of the Liverpool learning partnership and to learn lessons for policy in other parts of the country.

Last year, the Mayor and Councillor Nick Small, the cabinet member for education, asked me to chair a strategy group to establish a Liverpool challenge. The vision is straightforward. How do we make reality of the mayor’s education commission report? How do we move from better to best? What can Liverpool schools learn from one another? What can the world of education in Liverpool do to learn from the world of work and what can we learn from other parts of the country?

When I was a Minister, I had the privilege of leading the London challenge. I recognise that Liverpool in 2016 is very different from London in 2003. There is not the extra money that there was then, but that transitional support is of course different, but I believe we can learn from School Improvement’s experience in other parts of the country and indeed of the world. I am delighted that we
have engaged the support of Sir Tim Brighouse, who worked with me on the London challenge, and the Education Development Trust, led by Steve Munby, to support schools in Liverpool to achieve that further improvement.

The goal is simple. To use the Sir Tim Brighouse’s phrase, we want to improve on previous best. There are many components, and one is to ensure we have the money to improve on previous best. There is real concern across Liverpool about the potential effect of the proposed change to the schools funding formula. I tread with care, because I realise that other parts of Merseyside might benefit from the proposed change, but I am focusing on the city of Liverpool, where estimates suggest we could lose £300 per child when the formula changes.

I know that the new Secretary of State has delayed introducing the new formula and I welcome that delay. I urge the Minister to listen to Liverpool schools’ concerns so that we do not lose out when the funding formula change happens, because it is vital to have the money we need to be able to deliver the quality education that children and young people have every right to deserve.

Finally, I want to say something about the role of Liverpool City Region Combined Authority. I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram) is here today. Devolution provides great opportunities for local communities, local people and local authorities to work together to achieve real improvement.

On education, the existing devolution agreements are positive. The adult skills budget is devolved, which is critical because of the number of adults across the city region with no formal qualifications, and is significantly higher at 11.5%, compared with a national figure of 8.6%, which is a national scandal, but our percentage is higher. Having the adult skills budget devolved is crucial, and we have some powers over apprenticeships and post-16 education and training, including leading on a local skills strategy. These things are important. The metro mayor, working with the combined authority, can truly drive a skills agenda that meets the needs of employers and citizens across the city region. Will the Minister do all he can to ensure that the city region has the resources it will need to do that properly?

I urge the Government to go further. I served as a Minister in the Department for Education, and it is fair to say that, whoever is in power, it tends to be rather centralist in its approach to policy. It was thus when I was there and it remains so now, particularly with the planning and commissioning of new school places around the country. Decisions are made at the centre. That is wrong and goes against the spirit of devolution, which is that decisions should be made close to where the people affected by those decisions live. Liverpool’s city region is of the right scale and size to be able to plan for future school places. Will the Minister work with the city region to explore devolution of the regional schools commissioner’s work?

Ultimately, the Liverpool challenge, which is about the city of Liverpool, could be taken up across the whole of Merseyside. It would be a more successful challenge if that were done because there are lessons to be learned from different parts of the city region.

This debate deliberately has a broad title to enable colleagues to participate and to raise a wide range of issues. I have focused on just some of those issues: funding, the pace of change and the narrowing of the curriculum. I want to finish by making an observation and then reiterating my six questions for the Minister.

The observation is that teacher morale is really important and morale in our education system now is at an all-time low. That concerns me enormously because money and resources are critical and the accountability framework has a massive impact. The curriculum matters and assessment matters, but having highly motivated and committed teachers, support staff and leaders in our system is surely the most important ingredient of a successful education system. Will the Minister reflect on that? We all have a responsibility to ensure that morale is raised across our education system.

Will the Minister safeguard funding for nursery schools nationwide? Will he encourage best practice on information, advice and guidance? Will he learn from the collaborative approach of the Liverpool learning partnership? Will he protect the Liverpool schools budget as the formula changes? Will he look at the Liverpool city region and, in particular, ensure it has the resources to deliver the local skills strategy and move to give it powers to shape the commissioning and planning of school places? Those are reasonable demands to enable a good education system across Merseyside to become a much better education system.

I welcome the opportunity to raise these issues today and look forward to hearing from my colleagues and the Minister.

2.46 pm

Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I welcome the opportunity that my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) has given us for this timely debate.

I want to make three points about education in our city region. First, I wish to raise a problem that confronts the governors and teaching staff at St Aloysius Catholic Primary School in Huyton. Its June 2015 Ofsted report stated:

“Disabled pupils and those who have special educational needs achieve very well. The progress that they make in all subjects is good-quality support from skilled teaching assistants.”

There are 310 pupils on the roll at St Aloysius, six of whom are in receipt of an education, health and care plan. The first 12 hours of each plan are funded by the school, but some of the children’s needs are so significant that the school has to provide additional hours of support, causing further strain on its budget.

In 2015-16, the cost to the school of providing one-to-one support for those six children was £115,300—approximately 10% of the school’s overall budget. Effectively, this means that the teachers engaged in this resource-intensive area of the school’s work are not available to teach the other pupils. The cost of funding these plans, alongside investing time, money and support from educational psychologists and a range of therapists, is to the detriment of the school’s overall budget. That is a growing problem, as other schools, recognising St Aloysius’s strong commitment to children with special educational needs,
are increasingly referring more children there, at the same time relieving their budget of the additional costs involved. Will the Minister note that schools that refer children with special educational needs to St Aloysius will still receive that part of the general budget for special needs that all schools receive, even though they may not have any children with such needs? That is clearly unfair, and I ask the Minister to look at the problem, which, though it certainly affects St Aloysius, is, I suspect, not unique to that school.

My second point is about educational attainment in Knowsley. In early years and primary schools, outcomes for children have historically been close to or in line with national thresholds, but at the end of key stage 4, when children sit their GCSEs, Knowsley falls significantly behind national standards. To help to tackle that issue, Knowsley Council has set up an education commission. I hope that the Government will engage with that commission and support the work that it is doing to try to raise attainment levels.

I am sure that we all agree that improving social mobility is essential for improving the economic prospects of local residents and breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty. I welcome the Government’s recent announcement on the creation of new opportunity areas across England, which will see £60 million spent on school improvement in six social mobility coldspots. However, I was surprised, given Knowsley’s usual placement in the indices of multiple deprivation, that it was not selected as one of the pilot areas, so will the Government consider how areas such as Knowsley could be supported with similar targeted investment shaped around improving social mobility?

There are a couple of more positive educational developments in Knowsley. One is the Shakespeare North Trust, which has been carrying out plans to build a Shakespearean playhouse in Prescot. Its plans support the Arts Council’s goal for children and young people, which includes ensuring that every child has the chance to visit, experience and participate in high-quality, extraordinary work, and the chance to know more, understand more and review the experiences that they have had.

A further positive development is Knowsley Safari Park’s Bio-Inspire project, which will engage children of all ages in learning about the world around them, extending their innate interest in animals and wildlife to teach them about science, technology, engineering, humanities and art. I hope that the Government will be able to support that project also.

Finally, I would like to say a few words about the constant obsession of successive Governments with the branding of schools, whether we are talking about academies, free schools or, more recently, the proposals to expand grammar schools, and with decoupling secondary education in particular from local authority involvement. I think that my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram) will have more to say about that in a moment. Far too much time and energy has been committed to issues of governance and what schools are called, at the expense of a 21st-century cold hard look at the actual education that is required to equip young people properly for the world in which we live.

In an interview in last Sunday’s edition of The Observer, the chief inspector of schools, Sir Michael Wilshaw, gave a thoughtful account of the direction that we need to take in education reform if we are to serve the needs of future generations more effectively. Ruling out blanket solutions, and viewing the proposal for more grammar schools as an unnecessary distraction, he also drew attention to the post-Brexit challenge of the “need to develop vocational education in the system so the country produces young people with skills to replace immigrant workers”.

That is not to say that core academic skills, and the ability for those who want to do so to follow a more traditional academic education, are not important—of course they are—but rather to argue that in some cases, there should be available a post-14 education that prepares more fully those who choose the option of vocational education.

The oft-repeated mantra about the need for lifelong education, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby referred, needs to be developed beyond windy rhetoric—that is not what his speech was—into a concrete reality. In future, instead of education being a time-specific, one-off choice, as it too often is at present, it should be lifelong and flexible—in other words, an education for the 21st century.

2.54 pm

**John Pugh** (Southport) (LD): I congratulate the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) on having started this crucial debate. I do not know about you, Sir Roger, but I think that we hon. Members often find ourselves talking in this place about things we do not know a great deal about. Happily, I do not think I am in that position today, because I spent 30 years teaching in a variety of schools on Merseyside. I was married to a supply teacher who taught all over Merseyside. I have been a member of a local education authority and a school governor. I have had four children educated on Merseyside, and I even started my education in, I believe, the constituency of the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby, at Corinthian Avenue Primary School, if it is still there. The hon. Gentleman is nodding his head, so it must be.

I want to make just a couple of observations. Liverpool and Merseyside are seen as problematic in educational terms, but as Michael Wilshaw said in drawing attention to some of the problems:

“Are you really telling me that they lack swagger and dynamism? That they cannot succeed in the way London has succeeded? These are the cities that built Britain. They pioneered a modern, civic education”.

When I think of the history of Liverpool and Merseyside education, I think of a number of cracking schools, or schools that have been very good quality. Some of the names are now historical; some of the names have been changed, and sometimes the structures of the schools have been changed, but I am thinking of St Francis Xavier’s College, Liverpool Collegiate School, Quarry Bank and even Ruffwood in its pomp. I also think of Blue Coat, Alsop, Holly Lodge, the Liverpool Institute, which I know has gone but which my dad went to, as did two members of the Beatles. Prescott Grammar School, which I attended, De La Salle, St Margaret’s, St Julie’s and so on. There are a lot of good schools in that mix, and a lot of very eminent people were pupils at those schools. Incidentally, many of the schools that are now wholly private, such as Blue Coat, started off as schools with a particular impetus to address the needs...
of the most deprived children in Liverpool. There is a great academic tradition there, and we ought not to be in any way shy about declaring that.

Unfortunately, there has also been quite a mediocre tradition, in terms of technical education, and there is another less commendable tradition in the area: many families and many generations across Merseyside have seen education as a necessary evil—as a time-consuming interlude before the real world of work. In the past, that meant the docks, car factories, wholesale distribution or whatever. We can call that low aspiration, but at one time it was a perfectly realistic aspiration, because there were those jobs. Sadly, there are not those jobs now. The world has moved on, but attitudes have not shifted across Merseyside quite as quickly, so there is a problem that we need to face up to. The problem is that it is a low-skill economy. Despite all efforts in the past to do a great deal about that, not a lot has changed over the last few decades. There is low educational attainment in certain areas. What worries all of us, including, I know, the Minister, is the tale of girls and boys who simply do not achieve what they should, and who face a problematic employment future.

I know that the solution is pretty complex. It is multifactorial; schools are only part of the solution. We have to address such issues as housing, employment and family structure. However, it strikes me that the educational fix is pretty clear; it was well laid out by the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) not only on securing this important debate, but on the important work he is doing on education in Liverpool. His input there is absolutely invaluable. Education is vitally important in developing the potential of every individual; it is also important for the future of the city of Liverpool, and other areas in Merseyside, because unless people’s potential is developed and their skills can be utilised, the city does not prosper.

I note my hon. Friend’s comments about the background to this debate: the very high cuts to local government funding in Liverpool. He quoted the figure of 58%, but if the plans to 2020 are carried out, there will have been a cut of 65% to core funding in the city of Liverpool since 2010. To add to that, changes in the education grant formula are of extreme concern for the future. Although Liverpool City Council and the Mayor of Liverpool, Joe Anderson, certainly oppose those cuts, and are very vocal about them, they do not just say what they are against; they are very clear that they are willing to innovate.

That innovation has taken place in Liverpool, whether in building new schools where the conventional sources of funding have been denied, or in looking at the needs of the under-fives and protecting Sure Start centres, children’s centres and nurseries. There is a particular threat to the future of children’s centres, which are absolutely vital in preparing children for school and supporting families. Both those functions are absolutely essential. I applaud the city council’s efforts in working with the local NHS, through the clinical commissioning group, to try to secure funding from that group to go with local authority funding, and I hope that the Government are able to support that in any way they can. That is another example of innovation and thinking outside the box: looking at how we can put different sources of funding together to benefit the people we represent.

Further education is of particular importance. It is about developing a wide range of skills, aptitudes and interests, and also about giving people a second chance. Often, students who were not able to succeed in school—perhaps the educational system failed them, rather than the other way round—are able to see new possibilities when they go into further education and, in particular, college. It is absolutely essential that they be given support there.
Some 87% of students who attend the City of Liverpool College are from deprived areas. The abolition of the education maintenance allowance and other financial issues have landed a great blow on those people. When we look at ways of supporting individuals’ learning and education, we sometimes miss some of the basics. Sometimes people are struggling with difficult family situations, and when they do not have the means to survive, day by day, that inhibits their educational potential. It might not inhibit the potential of people who are already fully committed to education and have full confidence in themselves—those individuals can survive hardships—but people struggling to get self-confidence who are being encouraged to see new ways ahead sometimes struggle against the odds when their basic financial needs are not met. I ask Ministers to look again at that area.

There is a specific problem relating to the high proportion of students going to that college who have inadequate English and maths GCSEs. There is a problem in getting them to the required standards with the funding that is available, so I ask Ministers to look at that. There is also an ongoing issue about funding sufficient numbers of apprenticeships in that area. The Government have recently made statements saying that funding will be available, but I again ask Ministers to keep looking at that. Colleges should not be constantly concerned about adequate funding for apprenticeships. When students have commitment and want to make a real improvement to their life, they should be helped to do it.

Finally, I must mention the other vital area: higher education. In Liverpool, we have four outstanding higher education institutions. Liverpool John Moores University has made an outstanding contribution, not only to Liverpool, but to the country. It was the first university to combine what it then called employability—learning the practical skills of how to do a job properly—with academic understanding and analytical knowledge. It was the first to pioneer that, and it offers a range of very exciting courses. The University of Liverpool is an outstanding Russell Group university. It is outstanding in its teaching, research and the number of Nobel prize winners associated with it, particularly in the area of science. Liverpool Hope University has become an outstanding university, nationally recognised, and it should be encouraged in its work.

I must declare that I am a member of the council of the fourth organisation I will mention: the Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts. It is an outstanding higher education institution developing the creative arts, as well as interest in the creative arts, knowledge, practical ability and theoretical understanding, together with employability. Many of the stars of today were educated at LIPA. It might be worth remembering that LIPA began with support from the European Union. That is how it got where it was, and now it raises funds by other means. It is absolutely outstanding, and I hope that Ministers are able to support it. It is a credit not just to Liverpool, but the world; it operates internationally.

I will bring my remarks to a conclusion because I know other hon. Members wish to speak. I hope that Ministers are able to develop the points that I have made and to give their support, where Government support is needed, to go with the innovation and enthusiasm that comes from the city of Liverpool itself.
leaving staff under huge pressure. This is at a time when there is a chronic shortage of teachers across education after six years of missed Government targets for recruiting new trainees and with a hugely demoralised profession. The number of teachers quitting—some 50,000 last year—is at a record high. Our teachers should be valued and supported; they should not have their reputation and their profession traduced by the Government.

Skilled jobs and apprenticeships are an important part of education in my constituency and are a vital route into employment. They give an opportunity to learn and develop skills for the workplace while earning a living. St Helens chamber of commerce—one of the best in the country—supports local employers to deliver good quality apprenticeships. There are still concerns over the take-up of apprenticeships among 16 to 18-year-olds in Merseyside, and we need to ensure that the apprenticeships on offer are of a high quality and provide young people with the training and skills that they need.

As well as vocational training and apprenticeships, for many in the region, going on to university or higher education has been the chosen route to employment. However, statistics that I have obtained show that the percentage of young people in St Helens going on to higher education has dropped by more than 6% since 2012, and the percentage of children from disadvantaged backgrounds on free school meals going on to further education has dropped by 21%. That is deeply concerning because the Government’s own assessment shows that the cuts will have a disproportionate effect on disabled people, women, older learners and people from industrial areas such as St Helens. The Government talk a good game about aspiration and creating a northern powerhouse, but in terms of encouraging people into higher education, that seems to be little more than rhetoric, certainly for the people in St Helens.

I will conclude shortly and allow colleagues the opportunity to speak. It is clear that more needs to be done so that people in St Helens North and the whole of Merseyside get the good-quality education they deserve. The area-based review of further education currently being undertaken will hopefully identify the shortfalls and offer solutions. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) on securing this important debate. I am pleased to see the Minister in his place today. He has previously met me and other Knowsley MPs to discuss the current lack of sixth-form provision in the borough. Perhaps he will comment on progress in today’s debate.

My constituency spans parts of two local authorities: St Helens and Knowsley. We celebrate the success of Carmel sixth form, which has good numbers going to the redbrick universities, as does Rainhill High School and St Helens College, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn). Schools in St Helens South and Whiston are improving year on year. I congratulate Cowley International College, where I was a long-term governor, on its successful Ofsted rating of good.

A Social Market Foundation report showed that disadvantaged schools are more likely to have unqualified, inexperienced and inappropriately trained teaching staff. Many schools across the region are struggling with recruitment and retention of high-quality teachers and suffer from staff turnover. In Knowsley, a part of my constituency, schools are particularly struggling to recruit quality teachers in science, technology, engineering and maths subjects. One highly incentivised recruitment programme for maths teachers attracted just one applicant. Quality teaching is a critical factor in pupil attainment. The recruitment crisis will only compound the ongoing attainment gap and inequality in education.

Teacher shortages mean that schools are forced to use supply teachers who are often not qualified in the subject matter to fill the void and at a much greater cost, further challenging financially constrained schools. The crisis has grown under this Government, and schools and local education authorities need support to tackle the problem now. Over the past five years, freezes to the dedicated schools grant have led to real-term cuts in funding. At the same time, schools have had to increase employer pension and national insurance contributions.

Research by the Association of School and College Leaders shows that 70% of schools are planning to cut the number of courses they offer. Lucy, a St Helens resident and pupil in my constituency, is a talented musician who plays the flute. She is presently studying grade 7 and was on course to reach grade 8 by the time she leaves school. However, owing to funding cuts, her school principal tells me it is no longer viable to run the music GCSE course, leaving Lucy and other children absolutely devastated. I hope the cuts do not spread out and affect our search for funding towards our theatre in Prescot in Knowsley.

Instead of focusing on giving headteachers the resources and support they need to recruit and retain permanent quality teachers and to improve the maximum attainment of pupils, the Government go on to waste millions on free schools in areas that do not need more places. We do not understand that where we serve our constituents.

The Government are obsessing over a return to the 1960s grammar school selective system, but grammar schools are not the answer to the problems of our local education systems. Evidence from the Commons Library
shows grammar schools are not the golden ticket to social mobility that the Government would have us believe. In practice, grammar schools will create a magnet that draws more quality teachers and pupils away from comprehensives, leaving additional challenges of recruitment and retention, and therefore affecting the attainment of our pupils.

Evidence shows that grammar schools fail children with statements of special educational needs or education, health and care plans more than any other group. Just 0.1% of grammar school entrants have an SEN statement, compared with 2.8% of the total pupil population. Thousands of children with special educational needs are on the autism spectrum. The new special educational needs and disability code of practice states that support will routinely be put in place quickly when issues are picked up. However, access to diagnosis is a problem and routinely takes more than a year. I urge the Government to focus robustly on identification and speedy diagnosis.

Shamefully, evidence from the National Autistic Society shows that one in six pupils waits more than three years to get support, depriving them of the opportunity to get the best from their education. I urge the Minister to ask the Government to look again at how the new SEND system supports children with autism, and to look to provide local authorities with additional support in improving identification, delivery and transition in those children's education.

There are local reports of a lack of provision for some of the hardest-to-help young people—especially care leavers and young offenders. Many people would turn their eyes away from them. Budget constraints mean that some providers are reluctant to take on pupils who need additional intensive support. Free and grammar schools will not select those children; they will be left to other schools to pick up, adding further to their challenges. I urge the Minister to consider those children, provide additional specific funding and focus on meeting their needs. They should not be left behind as they are at present. The Government should allow more flexibility in current funding, to ensure that those learners can remain in supported provision, to help them progress according to their individual needs.

Our local authorities and schools are committed, and are working hard. Governors work tremendously hard and parent support is high—it is needed in some areas. However, huge cuts to budgets mean that schools simply do not have the resources that are needed. It is high time the Government chose to spend efficiently in education. They should look at the needs that exist now, instead of going for frills that we simply cannot afford, while some children are denied the education that they should be entitled to. That is the only way we shall do away with inequality in education provision.

3.22 pm

Steve Rotheram (Liverpool, Walton) (Lab): I am delighted to speak on this important issue, and I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) on securing this important debate. Often in Britain, and all too often on Merseyside, the place where people are born seems to determine where they end up in life, but education is a tool that offers young people the hope of going on to achieve their full potential. It can provide the ladder of opportunity for the next generation and education policy should primarily be designed to do that. It should not be a political football for any Minister or Secretary of State, attempting to impose a narrow sense of ideological entitlement on others. Schools in my constituency, and indeed across our city region, are proud of what they have achieved. The tireless work of our teachers, governors and staff has been mentioned by many hon. Members today. They devote their lives to getting the best out of children, but it has to be said that educational attainment is stronger in some areas of the city region than others.

I note the criticism of the mayor of Liverpool, Mayor Anderson, by the hon. Member for Southport (John Pugh), but the city mayor has been asked to achieve something with one hand tied behind his back, partly because of some savage cuts inflicted by the coalition Government of which the hon. Gentleman was a member.

Conor McGinn: Surely not!

Steve Rotheram: Surely yes!

The excellent work of many in our schools is often hamstrung by factors outside their control. Research by the House of Commons Library suggests that in my constituency just 38% of students get five A* to C GCSEs, including English and maths. With a national average of 53.8% that puts us well behind, but that in no way reflects the effort of the schools and teachers. Although it is only 10 miles away, Wirral's figure is seven percentage points above the national average, at 61%. It is easy to imply that schools need to do more and be better, as the Prime Minister said today. There has not been a Secretary of State in the past 50 years who has not trotted out the tired old mantra that we need more good schools, but improvement cannot be achieved without the collaborative efforts of parents, teachers and governors and, most importantly, it cannot be achieved without the Government's political will to invest fully in children's future.

For far too many pupils there is poverty of aspiration. In many cases we have failed to convince young people from working-class backgrounds that they can be the doctors, nurses and lawyers and even, God forbid, the political leaders of tomorrow. I bet that that is not the case in many of the schools that many on the Government Front Bench went to. The Government's idea of harking back to the 1950s and an elitist education system by returning to the dreaded 11-plus will do nothing to increase the life chances of the majority of young people.

The grammar school system is designed to achieve the best not for all but for the selected few. How can the Prime Minister advocate grammar schools when she stood on the steps of Downing Street a few weeks ago and promised the British people that she would lead a Government that works for everyone? Grammar schools will segregate, not educate. They will polarise communities, not promote social cohesion. Grammar schools would once again stifle the prospects of many of the children who would inevitably see themselves as failures if they did not pass the entrance exam. As Ofsted's chief inspector Sir Michael Wilshaw put it, grammar schools will “put the clock back”. The desire for selection at 11 years old tells us all we need to know about the Government and how they see our precious education system. It is a microcosm of their entire political ideology. It will deliver for the few, not the many.
As my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby highlighted, teachers have voiced their concerns about upcoming Government proposals such as the prospect of a national funding formula and the added pressure to offer a more restricted curriculum because of the baccalaureate and progress 8. However, the new devolution deals provide an opportunity to transfer decision making and accountability to a local level. We currently face a situation in which the Government seek to devolve powers over industrial strategy and economic growth to metro mayors while fragmenting delivery and centralising accountability in the education system. That does not make sense. We have a ludicrous situation in which local education authorities continue to have statutory responsibilities under legislation such as the Education Act 1996 while having been deprived of any levers to pull to fulfil those duties and influence outcomes. For example, every secondary school in Knowsley is now an academy and is therefore much more accountable to the Secretary of State, through the schools commissioner, than to locally elected politicians, but—guess what?—local politicians get the blame when they are threatened with the withdrawal of A-level provision in the borough.

The problem in Merseyside is not the level of attainment of the top 20%; it is the level of attainment of the rest. We need an education system that lifts the attainment of all, not just those who are gifted and talented. That is why I am calling for the return of an element of local accountability. Education provides the building blocks for achieving the economic success we so desperately need, so the Minister should make the regional schools commissioner accountable to the metro mayor. I would appreciate it if he would address that issue specifically. That would afford the incoming metro mayor—and here I must declare an interest, Sir Roger—the opportunity to create a city region education strategy that could work collaboratively as the catalyst for sharing best practice. If elected metro mayor, I will introduce a pathways to excellence programme in our city region and help to raise educational attainment in each of the six districts, lifting the level of aspiration across all our communities, with no borough and no child left behind.

As metro mayor I want to harness the pool of talent that we have. I want to attract global businesses to locate into our area, offering the high-skilled, high-paid, high-aspiration jobs we need, as well as developing the new businesses that will lift our economy. However, developing a world-class workforce has to start at an early age, and that has to be in our schools. The metro mayor does not have the responsibility, through the devolved powers they can use, to affect that, which is why we need a joined-up, consistent devolutionary approach between the Government’s industrial and education policies. I hope the Minister specifically addresses that point when he gets to his feet.

3.30 pm

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your stewardship, Sir Roger. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) for securing this debate and for giving us the opportunity to make contributions that cover a wide range of issues.

I want to start by picking up a theme that has been developed by the Opposition—that is, the question of grammar schools. Grammar schools are a complete and utter distraction from the things we need to do in the short, medium and long term. We need to put that on the record. It is not ideological; it just does not work. People talk about going backwards. This is not just about going back to the ’50s—we will be going back before that and it really is not acceptable.

In a debate such as this, the question is where we begin with such a vast area to cover. There is the whole range, from early years right the way through to university education. I wanted to look at the issue systematically in my neck of the woods, so I wrote to a number of education charities and asked them whether they would be prepared to talk to me about an analysis—research potentially in collaboration with one of the local universities—of my constituency.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram) referred to the fact that more than 35% of students in his constituency get grades A to C. The situation is broadly similar in my constituency, at about 40%. I want to tease out some issues related to that, because our schools do fantastic work. Teachers, governors and parents work hard. Day in, day out, they do the work that we ask them, but we can ask of them only so much.

I want to look beyond the narrower situation regarding education and try to determine what the other factors are. I have an idea what they are. In fact, a local group of headteachers came up with their views, serendipitously, and I will be working with them to tease them out. The issues were pupil welfare—diet, dental health, deterioration in accommodation, behavioural problems, mental health issues and stresses relating to the bureaucracy, as it is put. They have stresses and strains all over the place, and this is in an area with a partnership that has 24 schools, most of which are judged to be good or better, with two outstanding schools. One of those outstanding schools has had five outstanding Ofsted inspections on the trot, which I think is unprecedented. At this point, I pay tribute to the former headteacher of that school, Brian Mulroy, who died recently. He spent his life in education and was one of the men who got the school to that status. I put my thanks on the record for the work that he did, and he is not the only one who does such work and who puts their time and effort in, day in and day out.

What happens when the Government introduce things that result in the problems we have had with Concentrix recently? Hard-working families have been put under even more stress because their tax credits have been drawn away from them, and as a consequence, their children have not got free school meals. Whether we like it or not, that has an impact on children’s education. Those sorts of policies are not doing anybody any good. The late Chris Woodhead said that my constituency was doing fantastically against all the odds, and that is because we care for our children. Teachers and families do, and everybody tries to do their best, but they can do only so much.

The Government have to get to the stage where they stop the centralised control of education. Frankly, what Dorset does in relation to Dorset is a matter for Dorset. I do not care. Within parameters, it is for Dorset and any other place to get on with their education systems.
I support my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton in saying that we have to stop the atomisation and fragmentation of the education service, and the shilly-shallying around with structures yet again. We have to bring that responsibility back—that might mean bringing it back to the city region in collaboration with renewed and reinvigorated local education authorities. I support my hon. Friend and look forward to working with him on that.

We also have to put the resource in. There is something wrong when we have the situation we have in Merseyside. This is not about picking on other local authorities, but my local authority is the lowest-funded authority in Merseyside per pupil: we get about £300 less than Liverpool. However, we get £1,000 less than Westminster, and there is something wrong with that type of allocation of funding. Westminster is getting about £1,000 more per pupil than my constituency—that is quite shocking and it is just not acceptable. The Government should be getting to grips with that rather than fiddling about with grammar schools and the national formula. The history we have with this Government shows that they will fiddle the formula, which is exactly what they did with local government.

If we are to have a regime, let it be a localised one. If we are to have a funding formula, let it truly be a funding formula and let the children of my constituency get as much money as they need to get a decent education. That is the key.

3.36 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger, and, for once in a while, to be in a room where we are not defending or advocating for airports in our constituencies.

If I may allude to the physical layout of the Chamber, the Minister should not feel too isolated. A lot of great speeches have been made from the Opposition Benches, but I am always reminded of a story that came to me from a speech by my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth). There was a very controversial planning application in his area in the late 1960s for the safari park. He has talked with passion about work involving Shakespeare and the educational outcomes for the safari park, but the local councillor at that time was all on his own in supporting the development. One young, angry Knowsley resident stood up in a room of 700 and asked, with his baby in his arms, “What happens when one of those lions or tigers gets out on to the high street?” The crowd roared. This old councillor in his 80s—in Huyton, which was Harold Wilson’s constituency—rubbed his hair, sucked on his pipe and said, “Well, it’ll just have to take its chances, along with the rest of us.” If the Minister is feeling isolated, how does he think I feel as a Mancunian with all these Merseyside MPs right behind me? However, I have to say that since we built the ship canal in 1894, thanks to Daniel Adamson, there is something wrong when we have the situation we have in Merseyside. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) talked about it, it is shilly-shallying, and it is shilly-shallying of the first order. They are not tackling the key challenges facing our system: declining budgets and chronic shortages of teachers and places, as alluded to by a number of Members. They are failing to invest and our schools are facing, for the first time since the 1990s, real cuts to their funding.

As a teacher doing my teacher training course after Tony Blair got elected in 1997, part of my day job was going round with a bucket to try and catch the rain coming in from the roof. At the end of that Labour Government, if the roof had not been replaced, the school had been rebuilt, and the only thing going through the roof was children’s attainment. We have a very proud record of achievement in those 13 years.

There is still no certainty about how Merseyside will be affected by the Government’s proposed changes to the national funding formula. The Government continue to add to that uncertainty. Despite the Secretary of State’s statement on 21 July that the Secretary of State would set out proposals in Parliament in the early autumn, the Secretary of State still has not done that. It is important that the Government ensure that schools do not lose out as a result of changes in the funding formula.

Although the Labour party supports a fair national funding formula, we believe that it should be achieved by investing in all our schools, rather than by taking money away from some schools to give to others. The independent Institute for Fiscal Studies has shown that school budgets will fall by 8% over the course of this Parliament, as the budget was protected in cash terms, rather than in real terms, meaning that the schools budget is at the mercy of rising pressures and pupil numbers, and the impact of inflation on its true value.

With inflation today rising to a two-year high and many predicting it will rise again in the wake of Brexit—particularly a chaotic Brexit without single market access, which is the course we are pursuing—schools are facing real-term cuts. We have already warned that the Government’s proposed new school funding formula will hit areas such as Liverpool. As my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) pointed out, Liverpool has seen a 65% cut in core funding. Labour supports fairer funding, but areas such as Liverpool are likely to take the big hit. There should be mitigation in the system to protect school standards and ensure that a loss of funding does not hamstring local areas.

If the northern powerhouse strategy is to mean anything, it must enable local communities to tackle the root causes of low attainment and it must improve special educational needs provision, as highlighted by my right hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley. However, there was no SEN provision whatever in the Government’s recent schools paper, which included grammar schools. My hon. Friend the Member for St Helens South and Whiston (Marie Rimmer) pointed out that we need SEN provision within our school system, particularly for people with autism. If the Government were really committed to fair funding, they would invest in schools instead of cutting schools’ budgets for the first time in nearly two decades.

In my opinion, the Government have failed to build an education system—as a former teacher, I see this day in, day out—that provides opportunity for all. They are increasingly obsessed with structures—which matter—more than the outcomes for young people. My hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Peter Dowd) talked about shilly-shallying, and it is shilly-shallying of the first order. They are not tackling the key challenges facing our system: declining budgets and chronic shortages of teachers and places, as alluded to by a number of Members. They are failing to invest and our schools are facing, for the first time since the 1990s, real cuts to their funding.

Mr George Howarth: I gently mention to my hon. Friend that it is not usually a good idea to steal somebody’s lines when they are sitting behind you. [Laughter.]

Mike Kane: Let us get on to the real issue at hand.
I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) on a terrific speech and on getting the subject on the agenda. I also congratulate Mayor Anderson, who appointed a commission for the city. We welcome, in principle, the introduction of the Liverpool challenge, and I hope the Minister matches our welcome.

The shadow Secretary of State has often mentioned how effective the London challenge was and how it provides a model for steps we could take to improve schools, with a focus on investment, leadership and collaboration. It would definitely be good to praise the initiative, which shows how Labour, in Labour areas, is taking steps to improve schools for all children, while the Government are pushing grammar schools, which would cause most children in our communities to lose out, as highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle.

I remember the introduction of the Manchester challenge in 2008. That was cut when the coalition Government came into power, because of austerity. The reason that the London challenge was successful and improved schools right across the region in which we currently sit was that it lasted for longer and more money was put behind it. The outcomes showed that we can improve every area of the country if we match that provision.

Labour has called for more powers to be developed in local areas to help to tackle educational underperformance. The elected metro mayor of Liverpool would be a good place to start. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Steve Rotheram), but he says that if he is elected as Liverpool’s metro mayor next May—and I hope he will be—he will start with one hand behind his back because of the current powers.

My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby talked eloquently about the principle of subsidiarity. The Government seem to have nationalised the school system and privatised it at the same time. Today, the BBC is showing that the Government are taking a way the Government’s devolved powers to set their own standards for maintained schools, which would cause most children in our communities to lose out, as highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Bootle.

Turning to early years funding, it is clear that the Government’s proposals to offer 30 hours of free childcare a week are unravelling. As my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) highlighted, this is the most critical time. In theory, a 30-hour free childcare entitlement would see a welcome reduction in childcare costs for families. However, it is clear that the Government’s reforms are risking the sustainability of early education providers and the quality of provision available.

We have seen the decimation of Sure Start units in our cities and, currently, 750 nursery providers across the country are under threat. Many providers are unsure how they will meet their financial and statutory commitments, which is unsurprising given that their situation was precarious even before the proposals were announced. Freedom of information requests reveal that nearly 75% of councils have been given funding levels over the past five years that have failed to keep pace with inflation.

Figures published by the Department for Education in its consultation on the new funding formula state that about 40 local authorities face further falls in rates. As a result, hundreds of nurseries across the country are publicly expressing their fears, with a comprehensive survey from the Pre-school Learning Alliance showing that 750 providers fear being put out of business by the current Government plans. That would be a disaster for areas such as Merseyside. Maintained nursery schools account for many of those providers, as they have had no supplementary funding guaranteed beyond two years as outlined by the Government. The Minister should take this opportunity to end the anxiety and uncertainty that exists for many childcare providers by offering the extra financial support that will allow them to cope with the pressures created by the Government’s new funding formula.

In conclusion, Labour remains fully committed to ensuring that all our young people are given the opportunity to succeed on whatever educational path they choose, and that their opportunities are based on what they aspire to, not on what they can afford.

3.49 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Mr Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I congratulate the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) on securing this debate. I am sure he will agree that all of us in this room share the
same ambition to see a country that works for everyone, in which all schools improve and every child has the opportunity to go to a good school and to fulfil their potential.

I welcome the shadow Minister to his post. This is our first debate together in Westminster, and I am sure there will be many more such occasions, with him remaining firmly on that side. Over the last six years, 600,000 new school places have been created. We have spent £5 billion on creating those new places, and we have committed a further £7 billion over the next period to create another 600,000 school places. There are 15,000 more teachers today than there were in 2010. There are 456,000 teachers in our schools, a record number. We are spending £1.3 billion in the next period, across four bursaries, to attract the best graduates into teaching and we are spending £4.0 billion on schools, which is a record high. Of course, all that can happen only if we have a strong economy and proper stewardship of public finances. We are addressing the historical unfairness of the school funding system. We have consulted on the principles of a national funding formula and we will move to the next stage in the autumn.

I have had the opportunity to visit probably more than 400 schools across the country over the last 12 years, and I am convinced that there are two components without which a school cannot be great. The first, of course, is high-quality teaching and leadership. A supply of high-quality teachers is needed at all levels, and we are continuing to focus on recruiting the best graduates, particularly in subjects such as science, maths and foreign languages, with the generous bursaries that I mentioned. We are ensuring that leaders have access to high-quality leadership development training, including through national professional qualifications, and we are introducing a new teaching and leadership innovation fund worth £75 million over three years. Thanks to the hard work of teachers and the reforms we have introduced over the last six years, there are now more than 1.4 million more pupils in good and outstanding schools than there were in 2010.

The second component needed for a great school is a stretching and knowledge-based curriculum. The national curriculum focuses on the key knowledge that schools should teach. It has been benchmarked against the highest-performing education systems in the world and will enable pupils to acquire a secure understanding of the key knowledge they need to go on to the next stage of their education, to contribute to our culture and to participate fully in our society.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby mentioned careers guidance. The Careers & Enterprise Company is working with local enterprise partnerships and with schools to boost employer engagement and help schools with their careers advice. The Careers & Enterprise Company’s enterprise adviser network allows it to share best practice—he asked about this—through all regions, particularly in disadvantaged and rural areas of the south-west and north-west.

The hon. Gentleman is right to ask how the new schools funding formula will affect schools in Liverpool and the Greater Merseyside area, and we are firmly committed to introducing a fair national funding formula for schools and high needs from 2018-19 onwards. We are taking the time to ensure that the formula is right. We have protected the core schools budget in real terms so that as pupil numbers increase, so will the amount of money for our schools. We are launching the second stage of the consultation in the autumn. At that stage we can say what the funding impact will be for schools in all areas.

The Government are also committed to protecting pupil premium rates for the duration of this Parliament. Schools in Liverpool are receiving more than £30 million this year through that funding stream to support the attainment of the most disadvantaged pupils.

Mr Gibb: We often hear that, and we are encouraging schools to encourage parents to register for free school meals, even though their child gets a free school meal anyway, so that their school does not lose the funding.

The right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) mentioned St Aloysius Catholic Primary School and funding for children with special educational needs. We have committed to reforming the funding system for pupils with high needs by introducing a national funding formula from 2018 for high needs as well as for schools. In 2017 we have protected local authorities so that no area will see a reduction in its high needs funding, which is in the context of our overall protection for the core schools budget in this Parliament. We have allocated an additional £93 million of high-needs funding for 2016-17.

Mr Mr George Howarth: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way. My key point is that under the current arrangement schools are getting an allowance even if they have no children with special educational needs, whereas schools that have large and growing numbers of children with special educational needs do not get enough from the allowance to cover their additional costs.

Mr Gibb: I hope all those issues will be addressed by the reforms to our funding system.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs Ellman) mentioned funding for apprenticeships. We are spending £2.5 billion on apprenticeships by 2020, which is double the 2010-11 budget in cash terms, and we will top up employer levy contributions by 10% and provide 90% of the funding for employers that want to buy more apprenticeships.

It is important that children get the best start in life, which is why the Government are spending an additional £1 billion a year on the early years free entitlement, including £300 million a year to increase the national average funding rate. The Government are working to ensure that early years funding is distributed fairly and transparently throughout the country. On 22 September we concluded the consultation on the fairest way to distribute early years funding, and the proposals included a new approach, namely an early years national funding formula. The consultation has now closed and we are analysing responses. We will respond in the autumn.
Stephen Twigg: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way because I realise that time is tight. Will he address the specific issue of nursery schools? I think he will agree that nursery schools often provide a fantastic start for children, particularly in some of the most deprived neighbourhoods.

Mr Gibb: Yes. I have been addressing that by talking about the extra money for early years. As part of the consultation, we released indicative funding rates for local authorities and indicative and average hourly funding rates for providers in each local authority area. Based on our proposal, 75% of local authority areas stand the gain funding. The indicative rates show that the impact of the proposals in the Merseyside region will be mixed. It is therefore right that we look at each local authority area, rather than the region overall.

The Government are providing supplementary funding for maintained nursery schools for at least two years, as the hon. Gentleman knows. We know that maintained nursery schools bear costs over and above other providers because of their structure, and many also provide high-quality early education to disadvantaged children. The additional funding will provide much-needed stability to the nursery sector. We will be consulting on the future of maintained nursery schools in due course.

Thanks to the academies programme, schools have been released from the constraints that too often inhibited great teaching. The autonomy provided by the structural reforms has freed schools to innovate and pursue improved evidence-based teaching methods. Rather than a centralising approach, this is actually the ultimate in devolution.

Headteachers and other system leaders have seized this opportunity. As of the beginning of this month, there are 5,758 open academies and 345 open free schools, university technical colleges and studio schools. About a fifth of primary schools and two thirds of secondary schools are now academies. As the Secretary of State said to the Select Committee on Education in September, the Government want to see all schools become academies over time, and it is our hope and expectation that schools will want to continue to take advantage of the benefits that academisation can bring both to their own school and to others in the local area and throughout the country. We will continue to convert all schools that are failing to deliver an acceptable standard of education.

Steve Rotheram: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Gibb: I am hesitant to give way because I have literally two minutes to go and I want to respond to some of the other points. I apologise to the hon. Gentleman.

We also want to see good and outstanding schools choosing academy status so they can benefit from the freedoms associated with it. We will be building capacity across the country. We are also working with the archdiocese of Liverpool and the diocese of Liverpool to ensure that there are rapid improvements in other schools, such as the Academy of St Francis of Assisi in the constituency of the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby. The Education and Adoption Act 2016 strengthens the Department’s powers to ensure that every failing school, whether maintained or an academy, receives the support it needs to improve. The Secretary of State will not hesitate to use these powers so that underperforming schools and academies are swiftly turned around.

Let me conclude by briefly talking about further education. A strong further education system is essential to ensuring that everyone in our society is empowered to succeed. We need to equip FE colleges to be high-status institutions that can confer similar advantages to traditional academic institutions.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
Ministry of Defence Future Accommodation Model

[MRS MADELINE MOON in the Chair]

4 pm

Mrs Anne-Marie Trevelyan (Berwick-upon-Tweed) (Con): I beg to move.

That this House has considered the Ministry of Defence’s future accommodation model.

It is an honour to have you in the Chair for this debate on a most important subject, Mrs Moon. I asked for this debate to bring clarity and reassurance to our armed forces personnel and their families about their future accommodation provision. There is a Government commitment in the armed forces covenant to providing personnel and their families with good-quality accommodation, in the right location and at a reasonable price. I receive correspondence daily from families who are deeply anxious about the direction of the future accommodation model—FAM. There is a strongly held view among military families from every rank, in every service, that the Ministry of Defence intends to allow the present system, and its poor provision of existing service family accommodation, to degrade, so that the options put forward by FAM will seem less unpalatable.

The stated reason for looking at a new, more modern accommodation model is that service personnel want more choice over where, how and with whom they live, and greater support for those who would like to buy a new home. According to the MOD, FAM “is aiming to provide a flexible system that meets different needs at different times—not dictated by rank”—rank is not a factor now—“age or marriage.”

Given those stated aims, which are laudable and forward-thinking for the modern family, will the Minister tell us why the MOD is not simply looking to expand the accessibility of service family accommodation—SFA—to that new, wider service personnel audience? The MOD states that FAM is designed to save costs, because the way accommodation is now provided means that there have to be a large number of vacant homes at any one time to allow for rotation, which means greater costs for the MOD, but in the same breath, it states that FAM will not reduce the total pot of money used to subsidise housing.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend for that point. Friend on securing this important debate; given the interest in it, perhaps a longer debate would have been worth while. She makes her case well, and I invite her to extend her view to cover veterans. In the light of her interest in the military covenant, will she challenge the Minister on that angle, too?

Mrs Trevelyan: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. That is a wider debate; we will see whether we can persuade the authorities to allow us to have that wider conversation.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the key problem is the price that service families have to pay for their accommodation? It has been creeping up and up, and I am not aware—perhaps she can enlighten me—whether the Armed Forces Pay Review Body has factored that into its annual determination.

Mrs Trevelyan: I am afraid that I am not privy to the details of the pay review body’s work, but perhaps the Minister will answer that question for us later. I would also be grateful if he set out the present annual net cost of the SFA offer, to give the military families watching, who are very concerned, some idea of the funding available if they have to work with one of the proposed new options. We need to look starkly at what the FAM proposes, in terms of realistic housing accessibility from the private rental and purchase housing markets; realistic cost implications for families; and the real impact of the military community being broken up, leaving families unsupported at times of deployment.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): This is a huge issue for military families and serving people in particular. Does my hon. Friend agree that if we do not get this right, it will have a catastrophic effect on our retention figures? We will find even more people leaving the service, which would be pretty awful, to say the least.

Mrs Trevelyan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One key reason why I ask the Minister to reconsider the FAM is that it is unlikely to save the MOD money, because of the national housing shortage, and is likely to create a massive retention risk to our already undermanned and overstretched armed forces. Will the Minister tell the House exactly what he believes the existing housing offer costs the MOD in total, after rents received?

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing this wonderful debate, which is timely and important. Does she agree that one of the challenges is the inconsistency in the quality of accommodation? New accommodation in Stafford is extraordinary, but if it is made subject to a market rent, it will not be affordable to most service personnel.

Mrs Trevelyan: I thank the hon. Lady for raising one of the key questions. One of the great anxieties that families come to me with is the fear that the realities of the private rental and purchase housing markets will result in a mass exodus of experienced and highly trained military personnel.

Mr Ranil Jayawardena (North East Hampshire) (Con): My hon. Friend visited RAF Odiham not long ago. I am sure that she will recall that 95 bed spaces have been condemned there, and 97% of the 674 still available are grade 4—the worst-quality accommodation. Does she
agree that that is a false economy, because so many spaces are no longer being used and are no longer sought after?

Mrs Trevelyan: I recall our visit to RAF Odiham; we were frightened nearly to death in a Chinook. Getting housing provision right—particularly behind the wire, as at Odiham—is critical to keeping those highly trained personnel. An ambitious young Army officer said to me just the other day:

“Is FAM aiming to encourage home ownership, with tools such as Help to Buy, or force personnel into home ownership? If it’s the latter, that just isn’t going to work.”

Let us turn to the FAM survey, which was apparently sent out to all serving personnel—some 190,000 men and women. First, I ask the Minister why that survey was not made mandatory, as surveys are a great deal of the time; there was a recent mandatory survey on the language skill sets of serving personnel. Anyone would think that the MOD was happy to mandate, where that suited its agenda, but that for the FAM, despite housing being a vital component of the offer for our armed forces and their families, a lower response rate better suited the MOD’s case for driving change, regardless of military families’ complex housing needs and views.

Moreover, more than 40,000 people have been excluded from answering the survey because they are deemed to be a member of a protected group, including the special forces, the military provost guard service, those based in Northern Ireland, those on full-time reserve service contracts, those under 18 and unspecified others working with those groups. Apparently the MOD will ask their opinion separately, but that has not yet happened, and those groups quite rightly feel more than a little aggrieved that their views have not yet been sought. Their families are living with uncertainty about the future of SFA, just like all the others. Will the Minister set on the record what personnel saw on screen gave four choices; SF A remaining was not there as a fifth choice. Much later in the survey, question 24 asked:

“If SFA were available to you with the same cost as the renting package, would you want to live in SFA instead?”

That was not mandatory or part of the options offered for the FAM. As one pilot said to me, “we were annoyed that there was no option to keep SFA, forcing us to tick another option. In a few years, when this goes ahead, they will say ‘you asked for this, look at the survey results’.”

Secondly, of those who received the survey, many were unable to access it because their service number, which was being used as their access token, failed to be recognised by the survey designers’ coding. Will the Minister confirm how many personnel fell through the cracks as a result of that failure? The message received by personnel was:

“If your service ID is rejected during login it means you will be unable to complete the FAM survey, because either it is not a valid armed forces service ID or you are part of a group that is not covered by the survey.”

Unsurprisingly, at that point many personnel stopped trying and simply gave up. I would find it quite insulting to be told that my service ID was not valid, and I know that many of those who put their life on the line for us all did, too. It would be helpful if the Minister clarified how many tried to access the survey but could not get in, and how many started it but failed to complete it because, as one engineer said to me, “the whole survey just seemed like they had made up their minds that there will be change and we’ll have to lump it.”

Thirdly, many were put off from doing the survey because, as one nurse put it:

“This is a completely anonymous survey, please use your service number to log in’ doesn’t make me feel secure about speaking out.”

By my maths, if the Department has recorded 27,997 completed submissions, that is about a 14% return. If that is to be the basis of the evidence, we need to look closely at the questions that were and were not asked. Here we get to a key problem with the survey, and the Minister’s clarification on this point today would be helpful in reducing the sense of fait accompli that so many service families have shared with me. The survey that personnel saw on screen gave four choices; SFA remaining was not there as a fifth choice. Much later in the survey, question 24 asked:

“If SFA were available to you with the same cost as the renting package, would you want to live in SFA instead?”

That was not mandatory or part of the options offered for the FAM. As one pilot said to me, “we were annoyed that there was no option to keep SFA, forcing us to tick another option. In a few years, when this goes ahead, they will say ‘you asked for this, look at the survey results’.”

It turns out that those who failed to get past the service ID challenge, but then nagged the team running the FAM survey, eventually received an email that asked “which of the potential new options” for the FAM “do you think you would go for & why? Or would you still want to live in SFA? And why?”

If we are to give any credence to future decisions taken on a housing offer that moves away from SFA, it is vital that we are clear about who replied to which questions. A rifleman asked me whether the aim of the survey was simply to justify the dismantling of SFA, and said that to claim otherwise would be a lie, as the survey would have asked wider questions if its aim was not to justify the dismantling. Perhaps the Minister can reassure that young man and the other 196,000 personnel on that point and say that data from the survey will not be used as the basis for dismantling SFA, as so few serving personnel have been asked whether SFA is a model that they would like continued.

The Army Families Federation’s “Big Survey” report on the future of military housing highlights the critical importance of SFA in the offer; only 22% of those surveyed said that they would definitely remain in the Army if SFA was reduced and a rental allowance was offered in its place. How much has the MOD paid to Deloitte to create and manage the survey? Did Deloitte or the MOD design the impractical proposed solutions, which bear little relation to how most of the military family actually live? Will the Minister confirm whether any working group with representatives from family federations, service personnel, spouses from all ranks, SS AFA, the Defence Infrastructure Organisation and industry experts was set up? Is FAM and its four options—single living accommodation without family; renting near work; owning near work; or owning a way from work, and therefore renting too—what such a broad group would have come up with?

As one naval wife said to me: “Filling out the survey just feels like MOD justifying its forced changes and we are some part of sanctioning that. That’s why I haven’t filled it out.”

Although our Navy personnel are more likely to own their own home than those from the other services, because they are away from their families for six to nine months at a time, even the Naval Families Federation survey on FAM indicated clearly that more than 50% would prefer to live in SFA than receive a rental allowance.
An RAF wife who has moved her family seven times in 15 years highlighted just why the flexibility of SFA is so important to retention:

“Many occasions we have been posted with less than a month to move. With having to look for work, schools and everything else they want to put the pressure on me to look for a home? We don’t know the area and rely heavily on the knowledge that a quarter is in a good position with community support from other service families. The new FAM will isolate us all from that network, as well as putting strain on our family life. Seems as though the armed forces are losing the one thing that appealed to families and that was that they would look after us.”

The RAF Families Federation survey on FAM supports that family’s view, with 95% of those surveyed saying that being able to move with the serving person and live together as a family is important, and 63% highlighting the value of the accommodation being sourced and provided by their employer.

Another part of the jigsaw is the question of the footprint strategy that the MOD will publish shortly. Part of the DIO’s remit was to reduce the built footprint of MOD assets by 30% by 2020. That is 30% of all property by square footage. Although the SFA portfolio was sold off to Annington Homes back in 1996, the leaseback arrangement set in place means that the DIO keeps all the maintenance and improvement responsibility for as long as it keeps these properties on its books. The MOD negotiated with Annington Homes a 58% rent discount on all the properties, which will come to an end in 2021.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Order. The hon. Gentleman has not been present to hear the whole speech.

Jim Shannon: I was chairing another meeting. I have come straight from it, Madam Chair.

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): It is generally accepted that interventions should be from Members who are present for the whole speech. Is the hon. Lady happy to give way?

Mrs Trevelyan: I am going to run out of time, am I not?

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): It is up to the hon. Lady.

Jim Shannon: Just very quickly.

Mrs Trevelyan: Go on then, as fast as you like.

Jim Shannon: I asked to intervene because I am concerned that in Northern Ireland the MOD might be demolishing some of its houses in Ballykinler. The hon. Lady is being very constructive in addressing the issue; we need to see the same in Northern Ireland. Instead of demolition, there should be retention for the future.

Mrs Trevelyan: We are looking at the issue in Northern Ireland as well.

Will the Minister give us details of any negotiations that have started with Annington Homes on a new rental framework, which would ensure that a continued level of subsidised rents could be provided to military families? My concern is that the MOD intends to hand back the bulk of the homes, and then allow Annington to rent them to service families on a private rental market arrangement, whether behind the wire or not. That would meet the 30% reduction target, but would no doubt do nothing to reduce the overall costs of subsidising housing—that is, if the MOD actually intends to price the FAM offer at a level that families find acceptable, and that allows them to choose to remain in the armed forces.

I hope that the Minister can persuade me that I am wrong, but my deep concern is that the DIO was set a financial rationalisation target without any reference to the retention risk to our human capital, and that no one in the MOD is balancing out the potential financial savings of bringing in FAM with losing the security and support of SFA. In my opinion, and that of many of our leading military leaders, our armed forces personnel are working at unsustainable levels of undermanning. If we reduce SFA—with its security, safety and community for families, and with the practicalities it offers, despite the shortcomings of the present maintenance contracts for short notice postings and so on—we risk losing many experienced personnel to the private sector, and we open up a long-term retention problem, thereby reducing the effectiveness, flexibility and world-renowned reputation of the British military.

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mrs Trevelyan: I will not, as I do not have time.

If what I just described were to happen, it would have financial and military implications for a generation. The British people would never want to hear that the MOD had put cost saving over operational effectiveness, most especially for our human capital: the men and women who put their lives on the line for us.

The MOD’s strategic defence and security review 2015 states that Joint Force 2025 and Britain’s defence will continue to depend on the commitment, professionalism and skills of our people. Recruiting, retaining and developing the right people is therefore a top priority for the MOD. The SDSR talks about a new accommodation offer to help more service personnel to live in private accommodation or own their own homes. Perhaps the Minister can answer the question that goes to the heart of whether the Government believe in the armed forces covenant commitment, which is summed up by a highly qualified and valued member of our armed forces—

I have the greatest honour of being his voice today:

Mrs Trevelyan: I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mrs Trevelyan) on securing this debate. I know that she, like me, cares deeply about the wellbeing of our personnel. Her constructive contribution to the
Public Accounts Committee report will help significantly to improve service accommodation. She asked an awful lot of very detailed questions. I can assure her that I will not be able to cover them all in the 12 and a half minutes remaining. I shall therefore start, if I may, with an apology, and an assurance that for any detailed questions I cannot cover—there will be many—I will write to her. I appeal to my hon. Friends present that, if they can limit their interventions, I may be able to attempt to respond to the debate.

I am not going to pretend that the Government record on accommodation has been an unqualified success in recent years. It has not. Issues with Carillion-Amey have been well documented, not least by the PAC. Things are improving, but there remains much to do. Like my hon. Friend, I am absolutely determined to see this through and to ensure that improvements to our service family accommodation are carried through.

Nevertheless, the focus of the debate is not on the past but on the future. As our troops return from Germany and we look to rationalise our estate, we have realised that there is an unprecedented opportunity to do more for our people—an opportunity to give them greater stability, so that they do not feel they are being asked to up sticks at a moment’s notice.

4.18 pm
Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

4.29 pm
On resuming—

Mark Lancaster: Our future accommodation model is part of the mechanism for achieving this goal of greater stability. Its benefits are not well understood, so I would like to use today’s debate to explain why I believe it will be a vast improvement on what has gone before.

First, it will be fairer. As the Public Accounts Committee acknowledged, the current model has failed to move with the times. Let me give just one example. A married senior officer will be assigned a four-bedroom home even if they have no children or other dependents, and will usually pay just £350 to £450 a month for it. By contrast, an unmarried member of the junior ranks, with a partner of 10 years and two children, is entitled to nothing more than a single bedroom in a block. If they move out to the private sector to live with their family, it could cost them well over £1,000 a month. I am determined to make the model based on need, not rank, and I am determined that it should reflect modern society.

Secondly, the model will be more flexible. Times have changed. The sort of arrangements people were happy with when I joined the Army in 1988 are no longer applicable today. Some want to live closer to their spouse’s workplace. Some want to live among the civilian community. Some want to own their own home. Some, who are single, want to share with a friend or get on the housing ladder. Currently, however, our personnel have to like it or lump it. If they choose to go it alone, we cut the purse strings and they get nothing—they get no assistance, whether financial or otherwise, from the MOD. That simply is not fair and does not make business sense to a Department looking to release parts of its estate and expand in other areas. Why spend on new accommodation if it is not even wanted in some parts?

In future, we are going to give service personnel the choice of who they live with, where they live and what sort of home they live in. No longer will it be a one-size-fits-all model. We will now support servicemen and women who want to live in the private sector by subsidising rent, taking account of the geographic differences in rent when they are required to move. Alternatively, we will help them to buy a home. We have already made a start on that through our forces Help to Buy scheme, which the Government have extended to 2018.

My last point is that our future model will be affordable. I do not mean that it is an exercise in indiscriminate cost cutting, but the current regime is characterised by chronic wastefulness. To answer the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed directly, we spend about £1 billion on our accommodation and get about £200 million back in charges.

One in five service homes is empty at any one time to ensure, as I have described, that the right home is always available to the right rank. We spend £2 for every £1 of subsidy our personnel receive. We spend about £1 billion in total on accommodation, but nearly a quarter of personnel do not benefit from that. With the majority of our accommodation already owned by third parties and the cost to the MOD linked to market rents, costs are set to rise, but we can do better, not least because the money can be recycled back into the defence budget.

On the subject of affordability and efficiency, some are concerned that any savings we make could be undermined by a lower rate of retention—my hon. Friend made that point—and by dissatisfied personnel choosing to leave the armed forces earlier. In response to that, I would say that this programme is about finding the best way to make things better for our men and women. It is not about weighing up any savings we might make in accommodation against the cost to retention. We hope that our changes would diminish that risk, rather than exacerbate it. We are planning to begin piloting the future accommodation model towards the end of 2018.

Let me make three things clear. First, we are not getting rid of all service family accommodation. We know that there are benefits to the existing system—not least the sense of community it generates. In some areas, the absence of a significant rental market would make the system’s removal unworkable. In other areas I have visited, such as Ludgershall on Salisbury plain, we will be building new service family accommodation due to an increased demand as a result of the Army coming back from Germany. If we plan to scrap all service family accommodation, why are we building new service family accommodation? These are the sorts of myths that we have to try to tackle. I recognise that part of the problem has been the communication piece, and I hope that this debate will begin to address that.

What is clear is that the solution needs to be tailored to each location. What might work in London will not work in Benbecula. The amount of service family accommodation retained will differ from location to location, based on demand, operational constraints and achieving the best value for money, but reducing service family accommodation will give us more flexibility and allow us to support more personnel to live how they want to live. We are looking at options that would not
guarantee service family accommodation for everyone who wants it, but that is exactly the case today. I cannot guarantee service family accommodation for everyone who wants it, which is why we have other ways of providing accommodation. I can guarantee that we would support those personnel to find and live in a home.

Secondly, we cannot take these decisions without listening to what our people want. That is why we have been consulting extensively with service personnel, taking on board the findings of the Public Accounts Committee report and the Families Federation accommodation surveys, which also include our own survey. My hon. Friend mentioned that, and I will come back to her in detail on some of the questions she asked about the survey. Personally, I do not think that 28,000 responses is a particularly poor response rate. If Members spoke to Ipsos MORI, it would say that the surveys are based on the percentage of people who reply. The statistical analysis can then be used to form the opinion, in the same way that we have opinion polls for general elections, although they were not particularly successful.

To expand on the subject of our survey, some people have suggested that it was written in a leading way, to draw people down a specific path. I would like to put that notion to rest by saying that that was unequivocally not the case. It was in fact written in consultation with Ipsos MORI and Defence Statistics with the aim of producing an unbiased set of questions, as all surveys worth the paper they are written on should be. Clearly, my hon. Friend does not think the survey was unbiased, and I take that on board, but that was definitely the objective. The survey's purpose was to understand people's choices when presented with future accommodation model options. It also included a question asking whether respondents would prefer to remain in service family accommodation, but the programme is not about the future accommodation model versus service family accommodation; it is about coming up with a more flexible model that suits the varied needs of all.

Thirdly, at this point I should be clear that no final decisions have been made. Nothing is set in stone. The whole purpose of the consultation at this point is to offer a series of options, to listen to our service personnel and to try to find a model that suits them. It is all about putting our people first.

We have had a well-informed and valuable debate today. We all share the same fundamental desire to ensure that those who serve us are well provided for. The views of my hon. Friends—several have contributed—and those of our constituents will continue to shape our plans, but I have no doubt that the future accommodation model will provide our people with greater choice and greater stability. The old system is outdated. We are updating it so that it is fit to meet the needs and expectations of modern families in the 21st century. I am absolutely determined to deliver a system of accommodation for our service personnel that is fit for the 21st century and, crucially, for them.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the Ministry of Defence's future accommodation model.
two-year period of negotiations on how to leave the EU? They are asking for leeway, and whether we could still remain within the single market during that period.

Scott Mann: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for making that point. I will come on to the single market later in my speech. We need to be on the side of farmers, not working against them. A better subsidy system can certainly be achieved in the short term to install confidence.

We need actively to promote British produce at home and abroad. Leaving the single market is a fantastic opportunity to turn our attention to food producers and to become less reliant on imports, which can leave us at the mercy of currency markets. By making our agricultural sector much more diverse and profitable, Britain’s food chains could become more sustainable and less reliant on imports.

One avenue open to the Government is food procurement for our public services. Out of the EU, the Government could choose British food produce to supply our civil service, our schools and our armed forces. A policy and ethos of British food for British institutions would help our farming sector grow and be at the very heart of Government.

It is imperative that our farmers have access to labour. Certainly in the short and medium term, our farmers need access to workers from the EU. Just like British workers, EU migrants work incredibly hard—this debate is a good opportunity to highlight the contribution that they make to the economy in the south-west. According to statistics from the National Farmers Union, approximately 57% of workers in the meat sector and 40% in the egg sector are from within the EU. As we move forward, it is important that we balance the flow of migrant seasonal workers with the need to control immigration. I believe we can do both out of the EU. The National Farmers Union is in the process of drawing up its Brexit policy. One of its suggestions is the introduction of a seasonal agricultural permit scheme that would grant 12-month visas.

A British agricultural policy should champion agricultural employment, with joined-up initiatives from Whitehall for young and unemployed people to help them find work on farms. With such a policy we could end the nonsense of the three-crop rule and farmers being unable to bury their dead stock.

I would like a British fisheries policy that tears up the EU’s awful common fisheries policy. Restricted by the 12-mile limit, our fishermen have been treated extremely unfairly. It is time we addressed that and took back control of our territorial waters. Our south-west fishermen have felt like second-class citizens for far too long. We absolutely must stop that. British fishermen must be given priority, in parallel with the UK Government overseeing the management and conservation of fish stocks and quotas.

Under a British fisheries policy, Britain could extend its exclusive economic zone from 12 to 200 miles from the shore, as specified by the UN international convention on the law of the sea. With those waters, Britain could absolutely have control over its quotas, permits and conservation. Currently, the fishermen in the south-west are getting a very raw deal. For example, of the 4,500 tonnes of cod that can be landed, our fisherman only get 8%, while French boats get 74%; and of the 7,200 tonnes of haddock that can be landed, we only get 10%, while the French receive 67%. Those are not isolated examples—the same can be said for pollock, plaice, sole, hake and whiting.

Away from the sea, it is vital that we support our fishing communities in Cornwall, the south-west and around the rest of the UK. I have already had assurances from the fisheries Minister and his Department that they will offer support for fishing communities, and I hope the Minister will give me the same assurance today.

One big issue for fishing in the south-west is whether we allow European boats in UK waters and vice versa. There is definitely a balance that needs to be struck, as fish migrate around the coastline. With up to 80% of the fish caught in the south-west being exported to EU countries, it is important that we strike that balance, so that exports are not harmed and we maintain a good relationship with our EU counterparts. That said, our ability to strike free trade deals will also open up global markets for our high-quality shellfish and wet fish.

We need our farmers and fishermen in the south-west to have confidence in the process as we withdraw ourselves from the European Union. In the short term, we need to build confidence as an existing member. In the medium term, we need to lay out how we will secure and enhance our fishing and farming sectors. In the long term, we need policies in place that are more democratic and supportive, where our fishing and farming voices can be heard, and which are fully accountable to this place, Westminster, and not to Brussels.

There is so much potential for our farming and fishing sectors in the south-west. Over the next two years, I look forward to hearing how the Government plan to give a fairer deal and how we can grow our economy in the south-west as a result.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Order. Because of the number of Members who have indicated their wish to speak, with the authority of the Chairman of Ways and Means I am imposing a time limit of four minutes on speeches by Back Benchers. If many interventions are made, I may have to reduce that limit.

4.48 pm

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): I will endeavour to stick to that time limit, Mrs Moon.

I congratulate the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) on securing this debate. As he rightly says, leaving the EU has massive potential implications for agriculture and fisheries. I was very pleased by the assurance given by the Secretary of State in the House last week, in response to my question, that she would guarantee the current standards in environmental protection, so I will put those issues to one side for a moment.

The hon. Gentleman pointed, very rightly, to the importance of free trade within the European Union to both our agricultural and fisheries sectors. We export almost 40% of our lamb to the rest of the EU. He mentioned that we export 80% of the fish caught off the
South-west. In my view, the best shellfish, crab and lobster in the world comes from the coast around Devon and Cornwall, but sadly, most of it goes straight to markets in France and Spain. I was not surprised when I saw the headline in the Western Morning News this week, which made very clear that our farmers’ main priority in the whole debate is that we remain members of the single market.

My first question for the Minister, therefore, is whether she is committed, as her first priority for the UK, to remain as a member of the single market. That is vital not only for tariff-free trade, but for access to the important labour market mentioned by the hon. Gentleman, on which a lot of our farming and food industry completely depends.

If the Minister and the Government are not to accord importance to staying in the single market, I would like to know why not. If, as seems to be the case, the Government have already given up any hope of staying in the single market because of their wrong-headed and self-damaging obsession with cutting migrant labour, what levels of tariffs would she expect to be imposed on the sorts of goods that we have been talking about, both agricultural and from fisheries, and what level of damage does she anticipate that that will do to our farming and fisheries sectors?

We have heard worrying reports that the Secretary of State for International Trade wants us to leave the European customs union. That would be an absolute disaster for our agriculture and fisheries sectors, and hit our economy with a fall of 4.5% in our overall GDP and a far worse fall for agriculture and fisheries. Has the Minister assessed the impact that leaving the customs union would have on our fishing and farming sectors? I will also be grateful if she could give us some idea of the expected impact on consumer prices, and imported food prices in particular, not only from the collapse in the value of the pound owing to uncertainty about our access to the single market, but from the increased prices that west country consumers will pay for goods if we leave the European Union, or are outside the single market or, even worse, outside the customs union.

Finally, given the importance of all those questions to the future of the important sectors that we are discussing, will the Minister guarantee to publish a full cost-benefit analysis of the possible and potential options for our future relationship with the rest of Europe and the world, so that the public and Members of the House may make a considered judgment before we are asked to vote on anything? Does she agree that it would be absolutely unacceptable for the Government, without consulting Parliament, precipitately to invoke article 50 as soon as March before we have clear answers to those important questions on which the future of our farming and fishing industries depend?

4.52 pm

Mr Geoffrey Cox (Torridge and West Devon) (Con): I can make my points to the Minister short. On farming, may I first make a plea for any priority for domestic agriculture policy to include the concept of food security? Food security has been a principle much spoken of but rejected by successive Governments, including the one in which the preceding speaker, the right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw), served so honourably and in such a distinguished capacity. However, food security is vital, and therefore a vital component of any domestic agriculture policy.

Equally importantly, it is also vital for us to promote our agriculture in a way that we have failed to do in recent decades. The Dairy Council is the organisation charged with the promotion of the health benefits of dairy products, but it is not charged with the kind of marketing and advertising function that we see in countries such as New Zealand. I therefore urge the Minister to take from the debate my suggestion, and that of many dairy farmers throughout the country, that we need an agency or organisation that is devoted to the activity of marketing and promoting the fantastic dairy products of this country. The Dairy Council is not an organisation that is suited to that end because it is based on a research function rather on a marketing one.

We need to get behind British agriculture; we need to promote and advertise it in a way that we have not for many years; and we need a domestic policy that prioritises food security and domestic production. We also need a policy that decides very quickly what we will and will not support by way of direct Government grant.

On fishing, my plea to the Minister is to let any policy we design be based on local, sustainable fishing fleets that support coastal communities. This is our opportunity to ensure that a domestic fishing industry revives in the coastal communities that have been so hard pressed in recent years. It is our opportunity to deploy intelligence and flexibility, and to do away with blanket bans—despite the plentfulness of certain species of fish in the Bristol channel, we have a ray ban, a spurdog ban and bans that fishermen local to the area know are not right or intelligent. Instead, such bans should be flexibly designed. Any policy must support the interests of those fragile coastal communities.

The key areas and priorities that I urge the Minister to take away, therefore, are promoting, getting behind and marketing our British agriculture; and support and sustenance for coastal communities and local, sustainable fishing fleets.

4.55 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a pleasure, as ever, Mrs Moon, to see you in the Chair.

I congratulate the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) on securing the debate. It will not surprise him to hear that I do not agree with him about the benefits of the vote on 23 June for British agriculture and fisheries. The food and farming sectors face very real threats from Brexit. I appreciate that there are opportunities too, but I am already worried about the extent to which people have seized on the idea of those opportunities, because to some extent they fly in the face of what we know to be the Government’s agenda. In particular, in the context of protecting the natural environment, the Environmental Audit Committee, of which I am a member, is already looking at the impact of Brexit on the managed landscape and the natural environment. Yes there are certainly opportunities to improve how we do things, but I am less than optimistic that those opportunities will be seized.

It is also important to stop using the European Union as an excuse for some of the deficiencies in policy. For example, the allocation of quotas between
the smaller and larger fleets is to a large extent in the hands of the UK Government—the decision can already be made by them without the need for agreement with our European partners.

In the two and a half minutes I have left, I will talk about labour and workforce issues, and what restrictions on freedom of movement would mean for the sector. It has been estimated that 90% of British fruit, vegetables and salad are harvested by 60,000 to 70,000 seasonal migrant workers, many of whom come from the accession countries of eastern Europe. The vast majority come from other EU countries, and we need to answer the question of what would happen to the labour supply if we placed restrictions on freedom of movement, and whether it is something that can be dealt with through seasonal visas.

There is a fear that ill-thought-through restrictions on freedom of movement will mean that crops go unharvested, hitting food supplies, food production and farmers’ incomes, eventually putting them out of business. As we have heard, food sovereignty—food security—is a real issue in this country. At the moment, we produce less than 60% of the food that we eat, and 40% of the fruit and vegetables that we consume come from the EU. Things that can be grown here ought to be grown here, but that needs a supply of labour as well.

Last week, in Parliament I attended an interesting event organised by the Food and Drink Federation. Food manufacturers were talking about the impact of Brexit on them. I must admit that I had not realised the extent to which they depend on a skilled workforce from other European countries. They said that 27% of their workforce are non-UK EU citizens. Of course, some of those are at the lower end of the scale, filling the jobs that people perhaps do not want, or perhaps people are not prepared to work for below the living wage. Those businesses estimate that they will need 130,000 new skilled workers by 2024 and they were not confident that the Government’s existing policies on apprenticeships and on encouraging people to study the relevant subjects at university would pay off. They are already having difficulty recruiting and, understandably, their employees are already worried.

We had a debate in the main Chamber today about what will happen to EU migrants who are currently working in this country and whether they will be allowed to remain. What restrictions on freedom of movement will mean for both low and high-skill jobs is a real issue. I hope the Minister is discussing that with her colleagues.

I turn now to what farmers and food producers are asking for. I understand that under current EU regulations, as my hon. Friend referred to, we in the United Kingdom are not able to tell our public sector organisations that they must prioritise buying British produce. Because of that, we do not allow to be chosen a host of British producers over those from other European countries, UK food producers potentially lose out on billions of pounds. It would be fantastic to know that, during the negotiation and as we move forward, the Government will lead the way in buying British wherever possible and do everything they can to ensure that the British public know where their food comes from and the farmer receives a fair price. That alone will help significantly to mitigate the challenge that farmers and food producers face.

Both farmers and fishermen have requested that the Government promote fishing and farming as worthwhile jobs with secure futures. Parents often do not see that fishing and farming have futures for their children, and we need to do much more to encourage young people to take up those skills and increasingly high-tech fishing and farming jobs.

Finally, however we manage the movement of labour from outside the UK’s borders into the UK, we must not impose unnecessary barriers to foreign workers. We must strike the right balance so that our farmers and fishermen continue to enjoy the skills and labour that are available from countries around the world.

5.3 pm

James Heappey (Wells) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann), who is a fellow south-west MP, on securing this important debate. This is the second debate in just over a week to which south-west Members have turned up en masse—to stand up first for tourism and now for agriculture.

I cannot claim to have any significant commercial fishing in my patch, but I have a lot of farming and I know how concerning the impact of Brexit is to farmers. There has been a lot of uncertainty in the last few years, with low prices, the poorly administered basic payment scheme and the prospect of a significant change to the agricultural subsidy regime once we have left the EU and therefore the common agricultural policy. I welcome the Chancellor’s announcement that the current agricultural funding under pillar one of the CAP will be maintained until 2020, but despite that commitment the UK
Government will spend less on agricultural subsidy because we currently get such a bad deal from the CAP. That must be music to the Treasury’s ears. The end of the decade is not that far away, so the Government need to start articulating the long-term vision for farming in the UK now.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): We have heard many voices from the south-west but none yet from Dorset. Although Dorset is the smallest county in the south-west, it represents nearly 10% of the agricultural workforce. Does my hon. Friend recognise that there are opportunities for the CAP system to be reformed, which farmers have been calling for, specifically in relation to the timing of payments, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) mentioned?

Mrs Madeleine Moon (in the Chair): Order. For hon. Members’ understanding, James Heappey gains an extra minute.

James Heappey: I agree very much. I will come back to the importance of getting the voices of individual farmers heard. This is a question not just of subsidy—although that is clearly what most farmers will be listening for most keenly—but of access to seasonal manpower and markets, and the regulations that will be in place to facilitate that access. I therefore welcome the initial announcement that all existing EU legislation will be brought forward as UK law and thereafter amended and improved in the UK’s interest. That at least gives farmers the reassurance that the standards and regulations under which they operate will not change in a blink.

As for access to the single market, I detect a little inconsistency among the farmers in my constituency. Many in my patch have called for greater protection of the UK market to reduce imports of cheaper, and frankly less tasty, produce from elsewhere. I am not sure that we should go down the route of protecting the market, because many an agricultural sector is exporting enthusiastically and we would like to see more do so. Instead, our challenge is to promote UK produce in the UK and abroad. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall that a first step in addressing that challenge should be to ensure that British-produced food and drink is prioritised in procurement for public services.

I also agree with my hon. Friend about the availability of migrant labour. As was said during the debate last week about the tourism industry, there is high demand for seasonal migrant labour to be able to come through. The points system that the Government moved away from—thank heavens—would not have achieved what our farmers and holiday parks need. We do not just want rocket scientists to be given permits to come and work in the UK; we want agricultural workers to come in on seasonal work permits too. That will clearly work in the UK; we want agricultural workers to come to meet the demands of the agriculture industry at any one time.

However people voted back in June, the CAP was bloated and broken. We now have a real opportunity to set up a system of our own that subsidises where necessary to ensure food security and make our agriculture industry more resilient, with more exporters and more profit. But a word of caution: there is a real danger that in the post-Brexit policy bun fight, the large, well-funded lobbying companies will have the loudest voice. We need to make absolutely sure that farmers, who are notorious for suffering in silence in the solitude of their tractors, get a seat at the table to come forward with their ideas about what the market needs to look like post-Brexit. Farmers have incredible expertise, and it would be far better to hear them contributing to this debate than the well-funded lobbyists up in London.

5.8 pm

Anne-Marie Morris (Newton Abbot) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) on securing this debate. Like him, I see Brexit as a great bonus for farming and fishing in the south-west. It is a win-win—but so it should be, because we have significant investment in agriculture and fishing in the south-west. Some 72% of Devon’s land is farmed, and £2.7 billion of turnover in the south-west is due to agriculture. A third of all dairy and beef, and a fifth of all sheep and lambs are also from the south-west. Whatever happens post-Brexit will make a big difference for us in the south-west.

I entirely endorse the comments made about the CAP by my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey). It simply did not work, and it rewarded people in the wrong way. I am not suggesting that we should in any way remove its environmental role. We should continue that, but we should make it relevant and appropriate while ensuring that we encourage production. Many farmers I speak to say that there is absolutely no incentive to produce more. That cannot be right. We also have to get the balance right between the large landowner and the farmer with a small landmass to farm who has been short-changed against the big landowners in all sorts of different ways, in part because across Europe the farmers tend to farm across much larger tracts of land, and what works for them does not necessarily work for us.

Going forward, we certainly need to see better, targeted support that is more appropriate to the nature of our agricultural community, which is not the same as that of France and Germany. We also need to ensure that the regulations are properly scrutinised, because at the moment we have rules about the size of gates, the height of hedges and how much space is left between the hedge and crop, and much of that we do not need. There are similar issues. While we clearly want to ensure that animal welfare standards are at their highest, my farmers tell me that much of the red tape around what we need to do are unnecessary and so easy to get around that, frankly, they are rather pointless.

I totally agree with my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr Cox) about marketing and labelling, because I think very few people really understand what that tractor means. We could get a proper scheme going, with proper support to encourage supermarkets and others to really promote British, and we could have legislation that made it clear where the word “British” or “produced” can and cannot be used, because it is unclear and the European rules are different from those we have here.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that leaving the EU provides an opportunity for the UK to be more self-sufficient in
food? Currently we are at just over 60%. We have a great opportunity for UK farmers to sell more of their products in the UK and for us to be less reliant on imports.

Anne Marie Morris: I totally agree. There is a huge appetite to buy local; it is just that people do not know how to do that. Those of us who live in rural communities are privileged in a way, because we have all sorts of farm shops and we all know about them, but those who live in the cities do not get the same opportunity, other than when there is a local market or whatever. There is certainly an issue in trying to bring the best of rural England to the cities and other parts of the country so that they can understand and see the benefits—certainly in taste—that we can bring them.

There are other things we could do, such as introducing a crop insurance scheme that looks at the challenges farmers face when over a year we have bad weather and a crop fails. If we did that, we could have checks and balances to help our farmers. However, we need something that really works and not something that creates a milk mountain—that would be the wrong way forward. Of course, we need to invest in science, because if we are to move forward and increase our market share and footprint, we need investment in research to go ahead.

With regard to the fishermen, I entirely support all that my Cornish colleagues have said. The quota system does not work. I am not suggesting that we should cut off anyone from fishing in our waters, but it needs to be fairer, because at the moment the French quota for plaice is twice as big as ours, for Dover sole it is two thirds more and for cod it is five sixths more than ours. That really is not acceptable.

We need a fair quota system. We need also sustainable fishing—at the moment that is largely ignored in large parts of Europe—and to deal once and for all with the discard problem, because although the EU has talked about that for many years, we still have not resolved it. There is much to do, and I am absolutely sure that the British Government can put agriculture and fishing first.

5.13 pm

Sir Hugo Swire (East Devon) (Con): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) for securing the debate, which is particularly timely for me because I have my catch-up with the National Farmers Union at Crealy park in East Devon on Friday. We will hear a lot over the coming months and years about the threats and opportunities of Brexit and it is up to us as parliamentarians to ensure that the opportunities trump the threats.

The threats are pretty obvious to the farming and fishing sectors. There are threats of access to markets—we do not know what shape they will take—and we have heard about freedom of movement issues, and of labour in particular, in the south-west, be that for people working in the poultry business or picking vegetables or daffodils further west. However, it seems to me that none of us will lament the passing of the common agricultural policy or the EU common fisheries policy.

We have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to answer the question: does farming have a future? That is a question that, if we get it right, we will no longer have to ask ourselves. This is a time to shape our farming, shape our fishing and shape our countryside, to show people that there is indeed a future. It is self-evident, of course, that we continue with arrangements as they are for now. It does need the Secretary of State to confirm this; we can continue with the status quo until we sign the decree absolute in the divorce from the EU. It is what happens after that is important, as we change the existing legislation to reflect what we want for UK policy.

I think this is genuinely a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for our farming industries and I very much hope that Ministers in the Department will not spend the next few months or years talking to lobbyists or large organisations, but talking to the practitioners on the ground. I hope they will talk to the supermarkets and finally get some sense out of them in promoting British products at fair prices. I hope they will talk to the Environment Agency and Natural England and other organisations to ensure they are refocused to support a farmed countryside, not the sanitised version of the countryside as evidenced weekly by programmes that the BBC so loves, such as “Countryfile”—or, even worse, by the absurd Chris Packham.

Rebecca Pow: My right hon. Friend is making a strong case. On that note, does he agree it is important that policies are developed that allow agriculture and the good industry to grow and, as he says, create a healthy, sustainable environment with the soil, air and water, ticking all those boxes at once? As he says, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Sir Hugo Swire: Yes, and not all from the EU has been bad—that is the point. When we come to examine some of the legislation, and particularly some of the wildlife and environmental legislation, I strongly suspect that we will want to adopt quite a lot of it for ourselves. I very much hope Ministers will come to my constituency and speak to the principal and staff at one of the finest land-based colleges left in the country, Bicton. It should not be one of the few land-based colleges left in the country; we should have them all over the countryside. I hope the Minister or her colleagues will come and speak to them.

I hope Ministers will come and talk to dairy farmers such as Peter and Di Wastenage—who were farmers of the year in the Farmers Weekly awards in 2015 and who run a magnificent dairy herd—and address the issue of how we tackle the scourge of bovine TB and finally eradicate it, particularly in the south-west. I hope they will also discuss how we can deal with flood prevention and balance that against the needs of farmers.

I hope, finally, that we will discuss issues that are important in tourism but equally important to running farming businesses: rurality, services and broadband. Farmers need broadband. They are not only isolated in their tractor cabs, non-complaining. I am glad that my hon. Friend the Member for Wells (James Heappey) has found so many non-complaining farmers—I would like to find out where they are, so perhaps he could tell me. Of course, farmers do get on with the job, but when they come home to fill in those myriad files—many of which I hope a new British farming policy will render redundant—they do need modern communications.

I think 75% of the countryside is already farmed. Let us make sure it is farmed properly and let us make sure it is farmed in the interests of the agricultural community. Let us make sure we have sustainability balanced with...
environmental requirements and deal, as my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr Cox) said, with the issue of food security. On balance, yes, there are threats, but the opportunities more than outweigh the threats. We should be talking up British farming and British fishing because in the south-west it is our lifeblood.

5.18 pm

**Dr Sarah Wollaston** (Totnes) (Con): Time is short, so I will congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) on bringing forward this debate, and endorse the many comments he and others have made about the importance of our farming industry. I would like to touch on: issues for our fishing industry, particularly fairness, markets, support and sustainability; our coastal communities—the Minister, whom I welcome to her post, will understand that, as she represents a coastal community—marine science; and the importance of talking to fishermen and farmers as policies go forward.

First is the issue of fairness—that is what fishermen are looking for. When 73 million of the channel fishing quota goes to British fishermen and 211 million goes to French fishermen, clearly that is out of balance. Fishermen tell me that they are unable to access waters within France's 12-mile limit, but others are able to access waters within our 12-mile limit, so that again is an area in which we have an opportunity to make significant changes. Also, will the Minister comment on the issue of quota hopping? That has long been a source of concern to our fishermen.

This is not just about our fishing communities and fishermen; it is about the onshore sector, markets and access to those markets. Will the Minister join me in congratulating Brixham market and Brixham Trawler Agents? Last week, Mike Shaw and his team topped the £1 million mark for the value of the catch landed through Brixham market. That market was worth more than £23 million to our local economy in the past year. However, the majority of the produce that goes through that market is for export, principally to the European Union. Clearly, it is absolutely vital that we protect those markets, and that we do not drive the producer sector away from Brixham and other areas in the south-west to the European Union. I hope that the Minister will focus on that, as well as access for the important workers in that industry.

Many hon. Members have touched on support for our coastal communities, our fishermen and, indeed, for Brixham market and others. Although many grants have come from the European Union, we all accept that the money is recycled from our own resources. It will be terrific if we have more flexibility to use that money in a way that is right for our businesses and communities. Will the Minister comment on whether those processes will speed up, and become more transparent and less bureaucratic? We have a huge opportunity to do that.

There is also the important issue of sustainability. We will exit the common fisheries policy at a time when it finally seems to be getting its act together; the 2014 reforms have really started to make a difference. Continuing to lose our waters by sea basin will lose us opportunities. Clearly, under the United Nations arrangements, we will still rightly be bound to liaise with our neighbours when coming to these agreements; we cannot just unilaterally make changes. It is important that the Minister acknowledges the importance of having a commitment to a maximum sustainable yield and to protecting our marine environment.

We must also look at pollution controls and safety at sea. Those who put their lives on the line for us to put fish on our plate deserve an absolute assurance that safety will be foremost in the Government’s mind going forward.

5.22 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) on securing the debate. While speaking within the terms of reference of the debate, I will also make some comments on Europe. In 2015, the UK’s deficit in trading goods and services with the EU was £69 billion, while the surplus with non-EU countries was £30 billion. The figures are clear. What is not clear are the steps that must now be taken to secure trade deals for companies.

We must remember that when article 50 is invoked and we leave Europe, the seas around the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland will be open to all those who fly the British flag—to us in Portavogie, in my constituency of Strangford, as well as those in Brixham and in Looe; we look forward to working with our fishing comrades in the south-west. We must also remember that companies such as Rich Sauces service places as far away as America, while Pritchitts and Lakeview dairies are looking to markets in the far east. Those are farm products that are farmed and produced at home. We look forward to those opportunities, as do those in the south-west of England.

For years, red tape has bound farmers. Common-sense farming was no longer allowed, and farming became a pen pusher's dream and a worker's nightmare. I commend the Government, and the Minister in particular, for guaranteeing current EU farm subsidies, which make up some 50% to 60% of UK farm income, until 2020. The fishing industry has been slowly choked to death over the years. Our fishing boats have been forced to stay at home with no compensation while every other Tom, Dick and Harry fishes our seas. Our sea is heaving with fish—that is clear for all but the scientists to see—while our boat equipment is not suitable for fishing the seas that our fishermen need to fish, because the EU says so.

I will focus on where we go from here. For our fishermen, the answer is: we go back to work. We go back to fishing our seas sensibly, ensuring that we do not overfish them, that we do our part for marine conservation, that vessels have high safety standards, and that the fishing industry has the ability to thrive once again. We must also ensure that our fleets have the ability to access international waters, and that there is freedom, within whatever policy is put in place, to let fishermen do their job.

The Government, led by the Prime Minister, have a lot to do, and we encourage the negotiation team. The UK as a whole has a lot more to do to ensure that we ignore the uncertainty and make the most of this opportunity. We must feed into this process positively, as our fishing industry has the ability to thrive and the Government has a huge opportunity to focus on where we go from here. For our fishermen, the answer is: we go back to work. We go back to fishing our seas sensibly, ensuring that we do not overfish them, that we do our part for marine conservation, that vessels have high safety standards, and that the fishing industry has the ability to thrive once again. We must also ensure that our fleets have the ability to access international waters, and that there is freedom, within whatever policy is put in place, to let fishermen do their job.

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and we will do so knowing that we are striving at all levels, regardless of personal opinions, to deliver for all in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

5.25 pm

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I thank the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) for securing this important debate. He talked about why farmers are at the beating heart of our community and of the huge contribution that they make to the British economy. I know that is very important; I have a lot of farmers in my constituency. He also touched on the difficulties farmers have recently faced with Rural Payments Agency payments, and said that they really need Government support as we move forward towards Brexit. He also stressed the importance of maintaining good relationships with our friends in the European Union; we need to do that to secure the future of our farming and fishing industries.

The importance of this debate is shown by the number of contributions from hon. and right hon. Members. My right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) talked about the importance of free trade with the European Union. The hon. and learned Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr Cox) discussed the need for food security—a point that came out strongly in the debate; it was picked up by my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), who also expressed concerns about what will happen to the seasonal workforce.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about the importance of the fishing industry in Northern Ireland. He followed the hon. Members for St Ives (Derek Thomas), and for Totnes (Dr Wollaston), who talked about the particular challenges faced by the fishing industry in the south-west. The hon. Member for Wells (James Heappey) asked a pertinent question: what is the long-term future of our farming industry? The hon. Member for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris) asked for better-targeted support, which we will of course need.

I regularly meet farmers from across my constituency. They are concerned about their livelihoods and how much support they will receive in the future. There may well be new opportunities, as has been mentioned, but it is also clear that there are substantial challenges ahead. As we know, many rural and coastal communities have benefited from EU funding through the common agricultural policy payments, no matter how much that agreement is disliked, and also from funding for regeneration in our coastal communities and town centres.

The implications of Brexit for our fishing industry are highly uncertain. Figures from the House of Commons Library show that the UK was allocated more than £240 million in funding between 2014 and 2020, which was matched by the Government. I ask the Minister if that level of funding will continue following Brexit. It was said during the referendum campaign that regaining control of territorial waters would allow Britain’s fishing industry to thrive, and that leaving the EU would mean cutting red tape for farmers. Will the Minister give us a progress report on how she is getting on with that?

My right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter also mentioned the collapse of the pound, and we know that inflation has risen sharply. That will have an impact on producers through, for example, fuel bills, and also on consumers, through the price that they pay for food. We still do not know what rural Britain will look like post-Brexit. We hope that it will not get worse, but it may by 2019. The media in the south-west are reporting that farmers and fishermen are already concerned about the Government’s stance and about how the Government will defend their interests. Will the Minister say to reassure farmers and fishermen, not just in the south-west but across the country?

This country has benefited from billions of pounds of investment from the EU structural funds. Will the Government pick up that slack? Experts have forecast that Cornwall could, between now and 2027, need £1.1 billion of funding to match the EU structural funds payments. Will the Minister tell us if the Government will match that expected funding? Will they match the funding expected between now and 2017, which is the next tranche? I understand that civil servants are already becoming cautious about signing off projects that may not be completed before 2019. Will the money promised be ring-fenced and locally delivered? Rural and coastal communities have already been badly hit as a result of Government funding cuts.

We see significant uncertainty at a time when fishermen and farmers really need the reassurance of continued vital investment in the rural communities of which they are such an important part. We also need infrastructure investment for better transport, better phone signals and, as the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) mentioned, better broadband.

How do the Government propose to replace and reform the current system of direct payments through the common agricultural policy? How do they propose to replace the funding provided through the EU’s rural development programmes? How do they propose to replace the EU funding for agricultural research programmes? Will they guarantee that the common fisheries policy regulations will not just be enshrined in UK law through the great repeal Bill, but will be retained, to give certainty to the fishing sector over future policy? Finally, how do the Government intend to make up for funding for the fishing sector derived from the European and maritime fisheries fund, once the UK has left the EU?

I know that there are a lot of questions for the Minister. I hope that she can give me answers today, but if not, I would greatly appreciate written answers.

5.31 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs Moon. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Scott Mann) on securing this timely debate. My hon. Friend the Minister of State had intended to cover this debate but regrettably is unable to be here today. The subject would be especially apt for him, as he represents a constituency in the south-west—a constituency of which he is very proud—where these issues are highly relevant.

I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall (Mrs Murray) is here supporting me. She is a great asset to our Department with her
insight into this topic and especially the fishing industry. No debate in Westminster Hall would be complete without a comprehensive contribution from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who yet again showed an ingenious way of linking his issues to those of hon. Members in the south-west. It is also a pleasure to welcome the hon. Member for Workington (Sue Hayman). I believe this is her first Westminster Hall debate in her role as shadow Minister, and she made a very good job of it—well done to her.

Our priority is to ensure that we leave the European Union in the best way for the United Kingdom. That includes ensuring that our farming and fisheries sectors have a vibrant future, while recognising that the great repeal Bill offers, in the short term, the stability that the industry needs, which the hon. Member for Workington asked about. I assure Members that DEFRA will play a lead role in discussions and decisions on leaving the European Union. The right hon. Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) brought up several issues about markets and article 50. He will be aware that the Government have not yet made any decisions on those matters, although we are clear that we believe we can trigger article 50. He will also know that there is an ongoing legal case at the moment, where the Attorney General is representing us.

We now have an unprecedented opportunity to redesign our policies, as my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire) said, to ensure that our agricultural and fisheries industries are competitive, productive and profitable, and that our environment is improved for future generations. Representing a rural constituency, I know that these are really good opportunities for us, particularly in the south-west, which has a long and proud farming and fishing history. Agriculture is vital across our country. Our farmers produce high-quality food to world-leading standards. Our farming heritage has shaped our landscape, defining us as a country, and contributes to a food chain worth £108 billion. It is all the more important for the south-west, with farming contributing even more to the south-west economy than the national average.

The Government have already recognised the importance of providing certainty to the agricultural and fisheries industries. In the summer, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced that the agricultural sector will receive the same level of funding that it would have received under pillar 1 of the CAP until the end of the multi-annual financial framework in 2020. He later announced that all structural and investment fund projects, including agri-environment schemes and the European maritime and fisheries fund—known as the EMFF—signed before the autumn statement will be fully funded, even when those projects continue beyond the UK’s departure from the EU.

We have also confirmed that the Government will guarantee EU funding for structural and investment fund projects, including agri-environment schemes and the EMFF. Projects signed after the autumn statement that will continue after we leave the EU can continue if they provide good value for money and are in line with domestic strategic priorities. The hon. Member for Workington should therefore be assured. That provides the necessary certainty and continuity to our rural communities while we develop a new approach to supporting agriculture and fisheries and protecting our precious countryside and seas, which I hope gives some assurance to my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Dr Wollaston).

As Members have set out, there are a number of similar issues and opportunities affecting agriculture and fisheries, but I will address each separately to give both their deserved airing. We recognise the need for early certainty for the agricultural industry, which is why the Government were clear on the commitment on pillar 1 to 2020 and have offered further guarantees under pillar 2. There are clear opportunities to support our farming sector to become more productive and more resilient to risks specific to the industry.

Operating outside the EU framework means we also have the opportunity to better realise some of the connections between agriculture and the environment. As Minister for the environment, I know some of these issues rather well, and I am looking forward to realising some of the great opportunities. More than 70% of our land is agricultural. There are substantial opportunities to deliver for the environment and tackle some of the totemic issues we face—air quality, water quality and biodiversity, to name just a few. We will want to embed key principles, building on strong foundations, to take a modern, open approach, using data and innovation to drive productivity, maximise new opportunities and ensure we minimise bureaucracy and red tape.

I must reiterate that although some EU rules can be burdensome, while we remain in the EU they still need to be met for farmers to receive their basic payment scheme payment. I am led to believe that 99.5% of BPS payments have been made. If there are any outstanding issues, hon. Members can contact my hon. Friend the Minister and bring them to his attention.

We are committed to developing two 25-year plans for the environment and for food and farming, as set out in the Conservative manifesto. I assure hon. Members that we will be working closely with the industry and the public on what is needed to drive agricultural and environment policies forward. There has been a wide range of contributions and thoughts on a future agricultural support system.

Mr Bradshaw: Will the Minister give way before she concludes?

Dr Coffey: I am not concluding.

I assure hon. Members that there will be opportunities to contribute to shaping such a system in due course, but I know that my hon. Friend the Minister is already working hard on it.

My hon. and learned Friend the Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr Cox) referred to food security. I assure him that the UK has a high degree of food security, as shown by the 2010 UK food security assessment, which analysed the different global factors impacting UK food supply. One reason for our high food security is the size and competitiveness of the industry and diversity of supply. In terms of marketing, my hon. and learned Friend will be aware of the Great British Food Unit, which was launched earlier this year to promote exports, support inward investment and champion the excellence of British food and drink at home and abroad. It will be helping more and more companies to send their food and drink around the globe—including, I am
Sure, the 13 protected food names with south-west heritage, such as Dorset blue, Gloucestershire cider, Fal oysters and west country beef and lamb. Just yesterday my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State launched an ambitious plan to boost our exports up to 2020 while she was at a Paris food fair. She assures me that some of what she tasted was absolutely delicious and she did not need any dinner.

With regard to fisheries, the Government are committed to supporting the fishing industry so that it becomes more economically and environmentally sustainable. I recognise the important role the fishing fleet plays in the south-west, which is home to the largest number of fishing vessels in England. In particular, I am aware of Newlyn, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas). The south-west has a diverse fleet, catching a wide range of quota and non-quota species, and it is an important contributor to the wider food chain. With more than £100 million of fish landed by the south-west fleet in 2015, it plays a vital role in the local economy and provides much needed support to coastal communities, including Brixham harbour, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes referred and where last summer I enjoyed a pleasant beer watching the fish being brought in, while avoiding the seagulls.

Exit from the EU presents us with an opportunity to improve the way waters around the whole of the UK are managed, although it is important to note that even after we leave the EU, we will remain members of the UN and of other conventions. The UN convention on the law of the sea has quite clear provisions on the exclusive economic zone but also clear commitments to co-operate with other countries where there are shared fisheries. Operating outside the common fisheries policy will give us the opportunity to establish a new fisheries regime that better meets the UK’s needs, including, I hope, those of the south-west.

As with agriculture, we want to set some common principles for our fisheries policy. The UK has had some success in reforming the common fisheries policy to make it more sustainable with an agreement to fish to maximum sustainable yield and to end the wasteful discarding of unwanted fish. Ensuring that we continue to fish our waters sustainably will remain a priority, but there are of course areas where we might consider doing things differently—for example, making changes to technical regulations to better suit the specific conditions found in UK waters.

**Mr Bradshaw:** Will the Minister give way?

**Dr Coffey:** I want to address the labour issue. I apologise to the right hon. Gentleman, but I am happy to speak to him afterwards.

I assure hon. Members that I have heard their concerns today on labour as we leave the EU. DEFRA is aware that migrant workers from other EU countries will be one of the issues that will have to be resolved as part of our exit negotiations and future relationship with the EU. Our Ministers are currently working with colleagues across Government to understand all the issues and explore options.

On recruiting people into the industry, I remind hon. Members of our intention to develop thousands more food and farming apprenticeships. I am aware that Seafish, which has a national remit, has made progress on increasing the number of apprenticeships offered in the industry. My hon. Friend the Member for South East Cornwall referred to five fishermen who did a fishing course in Looe in August. All five have jobs to go to, which is great news.

I assure hon. Members that DEFRA officials are working with the Department for Exiting the European Union. We will continue to listen and I look forward to future debates.

5.41 pm

*Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).*
Westminster Hall

Thursday 20 October 2016

[Mike Gapes in the Chair]

Looked-after Children/Social Work Reform

1.30 pm

Neil Carmichael (Stroud) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Fourth Report from the Education Committee of Session 2015-16, on Mental health and well-being of looked after children, HC 481, and the Government response, Cm 9284, and the Third Report from the Education Committee of Session 2016-17, on Social work reform, HC 201, and the Government response, HC 733.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I am grateful to the House for the opportunity to debate the Select Committee on Education’s work on children’s services and the mental health and wellbeing of looked-after children, and on social work reform. Our Committee has a large and growing set of responsibilities, so it is an extremely good use of time to debate two of our reports at once. I appreciate the House’s indulgence. I pay tribute to the specialist advice we have received from Dr Matt Woolgar; Professor David Berridge, our adviser on such matters; and Marion Davis, also one of our advisers. All three contributed massively to the value of our work, and that is much appreciated.

During our inquiries, we heard from children in care, care leavers, foster carers, social workers and other front-line mental health workers. We visited the excellent services provided by Trafford Council, and we took evidence from a young woman in care and two carers. Our Committee has a large and growing set of responsibilities, so it is an extremely good use of time to debate two of our reports at once. I appreciate the House’s indulgence. I pay tribute to the specialist advice we have received from Dr Matt Woolgar; Professor David Berridge, our adviser on such matters; and Marion Davis, also one of our advisers. All three contributed massively to the value of our work, and that is much appreciated.

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During our inquiries, we heard from children in care, care leavers, foster carers, social workers and other front-line mental health workers. We visited the excellent services provided by Trafford Council, and we took evidence from a young woman in care and two carers with experience of mental health services. Our meetings with children and professionals in Trafford and Westminster were crucial to the recommendations we made. I thank all those who gave their time to speak to us; they spoke in a very helpful and frank manner.

There are significant challenges to overcome in both looked-after children’s mental health and social work reform. The responses from the Government to our recommendations were, frankly, a little disappointing. We need urgent action to solve problems with mental health services for looked-after children, but the Government have not acknowledged the urgency, and have passed the ball to an expert working group, rather than making the immediate changes that the Committee pressed for. Indeed, many of the people contributing to that working group will be similar to, if not the same as, those who contributed to our findings. Our recommendations on social work reform have largely been ignored. During our inquiry, it was clear that there are things that need to change, but again, the Department has not really taken what we suggested on board.

I shall start with the Select Committee’s inquiry on the mental health and wellbeing of looked-after children. Following a report on child and adolescent mental health services by the Health Committee and an update to the Government’s statutory guidance, we felt that it was a policy area that required scrutiny, so we launched our inquiry in September 2015. Almost half of children in care have a diagnosable mental health disorder, and they are significantly more likely to experience poor health and educational and social outcomes than their non-looked-after peers. Let us not forget that children in these situations are children of the state, because of their special circumstances. Our inquiry took evidence from experts including Sarah Brennan, chief executive of YoungMinds; Professor Peter Fonagy from NHS England; and Natasha Devon, founder of the Self-Esteem Team.

In April this year, we published our report. We found that provision for looked-after children with mental health concerns is poor in many areas throughout England. That variance should be of concern to us all. Some local authorities are providing integrated services, with a strong focus on multi-agency working and support for key workers such as foster carers and school staff; others are not. A significant number are failing to identify mental health issues when young children enter care, and services are turning away vulnerable young people for not meeting diagnostic thresholds, or for being without a stable placement. So there is good and there is bad, which is not acceptable. We found that methods of assessing children and young people’s mental health and wellbeing as they enter care are inconsistent, and too often fail to identify those in need of specialist care and support. For that reason, we recommended that all looked-after children have a full mental health assessment, carried out by a qualified mental health professional.

Leaving the care system can be a time of significant upheaval and disruption, and the period is likely to be even more unsettling for care leavers with mental health concerns. In short, it is the cliff-edge problem. We found that support for young people leaving care is inadequate and based too heavily on inflexible age restrictions. We therefore recommended that care leavers be able to access CAMHS up to the age of 25, rather than the current age of 18, and that the initial assessments of those entering care be carried out more thoroughly and consistently.

We received a huge amount of evidence on the capacity of CAMHS to respond and treat looked-after children and young people. We heard too many times that CAMHS refuse to treat young people who are without a permanent settled placement. The young woman we took evidence from, to whom I referred earlier, said that she had been waiting for CAMHS for more than two and a half years, but had been unable to access services because she had moved a staggering 13 times during that period. We recommended that CAMHS never refuse to see children or young people without a stable placement, or delay access to services until a placement becomes permanent. In recognition of the distinct challenges that looked-after children and young people face, we recommended that they have priority access to mental health assessments by specialist practitioners, and that subsequent treatment be based on clinical need.

The Government’s response acknowledged the vulnerability of looked-after children and the need for timely and effective mental health diagnosis and treatment. We are pleased that the Government have set up an expert working group for looked-after children’s mental health and wellbeing; however, having conducted a lengthy and detailed inquiry on the issue, we are disappointed...
that so many of our recommendations have simply been referred to that group. We will monitor the working group’s progress, and look forward to receiving updates from its co-chairs in due course, because we are very interested in the subject.

Let us move on to the second report. At the start of the year, we launched an inquiry on the Government’s plans for social work reform—and they do have plans. Although the Government had previously made it clear that improving the quality of child and family social workers and children’s services was a priority, the lack of clarity on how the aim would be achieved meant that we believed it was an important area for us to look at. During our inquiry, we heard from social workers, social work academics, local authority leaders, and many more experts in the field.

Social workers deliver an incredibly important service to some of the most vulnerable children in the country, but evidence suggests that they are doing more work than ever before. Children’s social workers are managing increased case loads: we have the highest number of children in care for 30 years, and the number of children subject to a child protection plan has risen by 50% in the past five years alone. Just last month, Sir James Munby, the president of the family courts, issued a warning about what he terms a “clear and imminent crisis” facing care proceedings, because in the past 10 years the number of care applications going through the courts has doubled. Despite those increased workloads, it is important to remember what an important job social workers do. The number of children who die due to homicide or assault has fallen by 69% since 1985 and remains in long-term decline. That is thanks to the hard work of social workers, police and others. This is not a story of social workers not doing things; the question is how they are led and resourced.

Although we can never be complacent when it comes to the safety of children, the Government need to ensure that in making reforms we do not forget about the good work that children’s social workers do across the country, which often goes unnoticed. On behalf of the Select Committee, I thank social workers for what they do, and I want that message to be amplified.

We published our report in July. We found significant weaknesses in the planned reforms, and recommended important changes. Existing career pathways are confusing, and provision of continuing professional development is inadequate and inconsistent. A national career development framework is urgently required. Children’s social workers need much more assistance after qualifying to enable them to specialise. That became increasingly obvious as we carried out our work. During our inquiry, we regularly heard that it is vital that social workers receive a generic start, with specialisation to follow afterwards. In the current system, however, that is far too difficult to achieve.

The Government’s reforms do not focus enough on tackling endemic retention problems. The average social worker’s career is only eight years long, compared with 16 years for a nurse or 25 years for a doctor. Almost a fifth of social work jobs are vacant, and they are mostly filled by agency workers. Poor working conditions, caused by high case loads, negative media coverage and the blame culture, are a threat to keeping good, experienced social workers in place. We need manageable case loads for those workers, and a national workforce planning system to forecast supply and demand. We also need to talk about social work in a positive way. I have done that already, but it is very important that we do so frequently. Without immediate action in these areas, experienced social workers will continue to feel under pressure and undervalued, and will therefore leave the profession.

One of the biggest problems facing social workers is the lack of a professional body. The closure of the College of Social Work in 2015 has led to a significant absence of high-profile leadership for the profession. A new body would take the lead on a number of crucial functions and so drive improvement in the sector, for example by defining CPD and the post-qualifying framework; endorsing courses; promoting practice excellence; and shaping national and local policy. That really is the No.1 priority and could address so many of the retention issues. The Government should halt their regulatory reforms until they have figured out a way to help the sector to replace the College of Social Work.

Finally, we could not ignore the wider context in which children’s social workers operate. While we welcome the attempt to introduce innovation, the Government’s proposals are untested. We do not believe that there should be any expansion of the independent trust model until there is clear evidence that it works. Unfortunately, despite the Government agreeing with us on so many issues in their response, that response seems to show that they are determined on their course of reform and unwilling to reconsider it.

**Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I declare my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

Does my hon. Friend share my frustration that too often there appears to be an obsession with changing structures, titles and the nature of the vehicles delivering children’s social care, when what really makes a difference are some of the things that he has already mentioned, such as making sure that we do not have 20% vacancies for social workers in certain parts of the country—that is why there is such a huge variance in the number of children taken into care in different local authorities—and looking at the quality of the outcomes for these children? We should do that, rather than obsessing about the system, which is supposedly there to help these children. It is the people on the ground and to whom my hon. Friend quite rightly paid tribute—the too-often maligned social workers—who really help, but they are damned if they do and damned if they don’t.

**Mr Carmichael:** I thank my hon. Friend for making some really strong points. He is absolutely right about the obsession with structure, as opposed to the importance of the people operating within it. That is why I first of all pay tribute to social workers, and believe that their leadership and reputation need to be enhanced and protected through a professional body; that is something that the Government have to think about carefully.

Although we are happy to hear that the Government plan to consult on many of their reforms, we still believe that there is a lack of detail on how to tackle some of the trickier issues, such as the retention of social workers. Moreover, there is a lack of detail on how some of the proposals are to be taken forward, and how extensive and binding the consultation exercises are likely to be.
The Government said in their response to our report:
"We agree that the development of a strong professional body for social work is important."

However, they also said that they thought such a body “would be one established by the...profession.”

We are a bit disappointed about that, because we believe that the Government need to be much more proactive in their efforts to replace the College of Social Work. I hope that the Minister will address that point when he rises to his feet.

The sector needs to be more heavily involved in this area, of course, but the Government have previously invested in the College of Social Work, and there is still a key role for them to play in the creation of a new professional body; it is not sufficient for them to say that the profession needs such a body while doing nothing to encourage its creation. The establishment instead of a Government-controlled regulator seems to suggest precisely the opposite: that the task of defining social work, and good social work practice, is being taken out of the hands of social workers. That is the opposite direction of travel to the one that we recommend. That is worrying, and we are concerned that the Government have not fully understood the significance of the move towards regulation, and away from supporting the creation of a professional body.

Social workers face pressured working conditions, and the Government response suggests that action on that issue is not being taken quickly enough. Our recommendation that social workers nationally have manageable case loads was rejected. That was despite Ofsted saying that the local authorities that were judged to be good had almost always set manageable limits for their social workers—something we picked up on in Trafford. A recent National Audit Office report that was very critical of the Government’s action on improving children’s services also raised the issue of social worker case loads. We are disappointed that no immediate action on this front is planned.

In some cases, the Government’s response was to reject our recommendations without sufficient justification. For example, despite agreeing that the assessed and supported year in employment was important for newly qualified social workers, they rejected the recommendation to make it mandatory. We are unclear as to why they did that.

Both our inquiries revealed the pressures that children’s services are under. Our inquiry on the mental health of looked-after children found that CAMHS are overwhelmed, and that many specialist teams that offered targeted support for looked-after children have been abolished due to financial pressures. In some areas, children’s social workers face having unmanageable case loads, which is leading to low morale and poor working conditions, as was mentioned earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton).

Experienced social workers are exiting the profession in record numbers. As I have said, Ofsted has found that the local authorities that are judged to be good tend to be the ones that give their social workers manageable case loads; the Government must take account of that.

We also found that services were inconsistent across the country. I have already said this, but it is important to note that initial mental health assessments are highly variable. Many local authorities are not meeting their statutory requirement to ensure that all children are properly assessed on entering care. I would have thought that was of fundamental importance. While there are some good authorities—we cannot deny that, and we should always support those that are good—that support their children’s social workers with good leadership, access to continuing professional development and manageable case loads, far too many are still not in that category, or even in the vicinity of it. There are regions with significant retention problems, and it is clear from Ofsted reports that plugging the gap with agency workers does not bring about a satisfactory solution.

Both inquiries found that training and development for professionals in children’s services are poor. Children’s social workers lack a professional body, and their access to CPD is inconsistent and inadequate. Put simply, it is not good enough. A new professional body for social work, created with help from the Government, could define professional standards for qualifying and post-qualifying practice, and be given a mandate to define the CPD and post-qualifying pathways for the children’s social work profession. This debate is about a profession and the people within it, and we believe that they should have an appropriate body.

Training and support for foster and residential carers is highly variable, and many local authorities fail to equip carers with the knowledge and skills needed to support looked-after children with mental health difficulties. Foster and residential carers are professionals who need comprehensive and regular training in how to properly support children and young people in their care. We have recently launched a further inquiry on fostering, and we will look in more detail at the issues in the coming months.

Despite the Government agreeing with much of our thinking, the responses to both reports lacked the determined aim to implement change in an urgent fashion. It is hugely disappointing that the Government referred so many of the recommendations to an expert working group. On such an important and pressing issue, delaying action and effectively passing the buck is not helpful.

**Tim Loughton:** I share my hon. Friend’s frustration, but the frustration is worse than that: some of the recommendations in his Committee’s excellent reports relate to recommendations made in the Munro review, which reported in 2011. Since then, very little progress has been made on those recommendations, which have been looked at, researched and looked at again, and they remain unimplemented.

**Neil Carmichael:** I am grateful for my hon. Friend’s support. He underlines points that I have made, but he is absolutely right about the lack of progress since 2011. I am pleased to have the opportunity to talk about these issues in the Chamber, because both reports are emblematic of our interest in the whole question of children’s services. I thank all the Members who have come to participate. Two of my colleagues on the Education Committee have done so, and I am grateful to them. We have a huge chance to make an important difference in both these critical areas. It is clear that we all share the objective of improving outcomes for children in care, and I do not doubt that the Minister is as keen as we are to see improvement. I am grateful for all that he has
done in the past to demonstrate that commitment. We need a response to my questions, and an approach to our two reports that suggests a sense of urgency and a commitment to ensuring that we can deliver a better future for children in need of support and help. I commend those thoughts to the House, and I hope that the Minister will answer my questions in due course.

1.54 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Chair of the Education Committee, the hon. Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael), for setting the scene so well. As many in the Chamber will know, I have a particular interest in the mental health and wellbeing of children, which the report looks into in some detail. I want to provide some comment on the report, while being ever mindful of the way that the hon. Gentleman has clearly set out the issues, where the needs are, and perhaps where they have not been met but we hope that they will.

The issue of foster children is of particular interest to me. I know that it is of interest to many others, inside the Chamber and outside it. I commend the members of the Education Committee on the report and the hard work and effort they have clearly put into it. They should be praised for that, and I put that on record.

The welfare of children is one of the most important issues that this House can deal with. Decisions made in this place have the ability to help or hinder a child in their progress towards becoming a contributing member of society. We only get one chance to have a great childhood. We do not get a chance to relive it, just as we do not get a chance to relive later stages of our lives. I was blessed to have a great stable home life, with parents who loved and supported us no matter what the issues were. I have attempted to give my sons a great childhood, and I do what I can in my granddaughters’ lives to see them happy and contented.

The thrust and the theme of the report, I suggest, is how we can look after children at the earliest stage. My home is not perfect. As a father I have done things that I probably should not have done. I have made mistakes, and were my boys here they would laughingly list some of my not-so-finest moments—I am sure there are many—but there is love in our home, and that is important. The report gives us a chance to understand the issues in fostering and the need for foster parents.

It breaks my heart that 2,212 children were living with foster families in Northern Ireland as of 31 March. It is a devolved matter, and I understand that. That figure is nearly nine-tenths—88%—of the 2,500 children in care looked after away from home in Northern Ireland. There are approximately 2,095 foster families in Northern Ireland, and the Fostering Network estimates that fostering services need to recruit a further 170 foster families in the next 12 months.

I have spoken about the issues before in the House, and they are real in my constituency. I have a particular interest in fostering, and I meet people every week in my office who are affected by it. It breaks my heart when I meet women who have given their children up because, although they love them, they cannot give them the life they deserve and need or, sometimes, the care they need. Sometimes love just is not enough. Help and support should be available for those brave families who make sacrifices to give their child a good start in life. The issues are real, and the report’s important recommendations would ensure that children who have to be looked after away from home are helped in the best way possible and the strategy in place is the best available.

In particular, I echo the recommendation that the Government amend the statutory guidance to make it clear that a strengths and difficulties questionnaire should be completed as a starting point for every child entering care. I commend the Committee on that helpful recommendation. Children who are put into care feel that loss the most keenly. They feel abandoned, unwanted and unloved, and those feelings can lead to emotional wounds that may never heal if they do not receive the care and attention that is needed. Putting that recommendation in the report goes a long way to addressing the issues that I perceive in the system. The mental health assessment is one step in ensuring that children get the care and support they need for healing to take place, for them to be integrated into society and to make them feel part of society.

I was surprised to learn that the CAMHS team does not help those who are not in a long-term home. While I can understand the rationale—a stable environment helps the process—I have also seen at first hand the tremendous job that the team can do. That is not just in my constituency, but across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. My office has helped many people who would swear by the difference that our local CAMHS team in Newtownards is able to make with children. The team does marvellous work, and I would like to see a wee bit more focus on that. I agree with the Committee report that the CAMHS team must be available to foster children who are put into foster homes for any length of time, and I hope that is done as a matter of urgency. I commend the Committee for that recommendation, which is a step in the right direction.

The Minister is assiduous and responds to our queries on every occasion, in every position that he holds. I look forward to his response. I congratulate the Committee on its hard work and commend Committee Members who have made a significant contribution on this emotive and essential topic. I look forward to seeing how the system for looked-after children will improve when the recommendations come into action, and how we in Northern Ireland can follow suit.

2 pm

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes, in a debate on this very important issue. The voices of children in care are seldom heard and too often their needs are forgotten. When society does take an interest in the needs of children in care, the focus is far more often on their physical needs than on their mental health and emotional needs, which mirrors the way that mental health is generally treated in society, so I am delighted that the Education Committee pursued this inquiry, involved highly respected experts and professionals and brought forward this report and its recommendations.

As the Children and Social Work Bill is currently going through the House of Lords, this is a real opportunity to make substantial change to the lives of the most
vulnerable, and I do not want the opportunity to pass us by. I will come on to the Government’s response to the inquiry later, but if the report had not been carried out, I would have been more enthusiastic about the setting up of a Government expert working group on the mental health of looked-after children. I gently remind the Minister that the Education Committee has taken evidence from expert witnesses, all of whom are cited in the excellent report. It took a year to get the report to this stage. To start that process all over again by setting up an expert working group, which may well come to similar conclusions, would feel like a reluctance to take meaningful and prompt action.

The mental health and emotional needs of a child in care must be considered as at least as important as any other need that a child in care may face, because, whatever the reason for being in care, these children have suffered the trauma of losing parents, siblings and all that is familiar to them—friends, schools, a sense of belonging, a sense of identity—and may carry with them a stigma or sense of being unwanted or unloved, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) noted. During their time in care, they may have experienced multiple placements which will only intensify the feelings of loss, rejection and instability. There can be no doubt that children in care will need help and emotional support to overcome that trauma and move forward with their lives. They will need tools to overcome the challenges and build resilience to cope with whatever has come their way.

As has already been mentioned, children coming into care receive statutory health assessments, but mental health is not always addressed and certainly not on an equal footing, as the Committee heard in evidence to the inquiry. Sometimes the difficulties that children in care face are put down to challenging behaviour, rather than being defined and addressed as mental health needs.

I used to sit on fostering and adoption panels and often we would sit around discussing and worrying about smoke alarms and stair gates and the physical needs of children being taken into care. There was always a glaring omission. We would ask foster carers about how much exercise they took or how many cigarettes they smoked, but we did not ask them how they would deal with the emotional needs of a child who had experienced trauma and loss. We did not even attempt to discuss a child’s mental health needs or the help and support foster carers would need in order to address those concerns. That happens because mental health needs are less visible, and for that reason, we must not ignore them. There must be recognition that children in care will have a higher risk of developing mental health problems.

Members will know from surgeries that it is hard enough to access CAMHS when there is a devoted parent to fight a child’s corner. If the child is in care, moving around from placement to placement, they are not entitled to access to CAMHS until they have a stable placement. Priority access is therefore even more important. A child cannot get access if they are 16 to 18-years old and not in school, and yet a child in care is less likely to be in school at that age. Children in care and care leavers will seldom have someone to fight their corner. It is the state that has taken the decision to take the child from their family and, having done so, it is for the state to make adequate provision for their needs.

It is not enough just to say that the help is out there. There are difficulties with the availability of mental health provision for all children, including with accessing and navigating the system. Accessing mental health care, asking for help and overcoming stigma is hard enough for any young person, even with a strong, supportive family, and we have to acknowledge that.

The Minister has done much to support young people in care and care leavers, and I am sure that he will have carefully read the report and its recommendations. He will be more familiar than most with the outcomes for care leavers, and I will not rehearse them here, but it is arguable that those poor outcomes are directly connected to the neglected emotional health and wellbeing needs of young people in care, which is why this inquiry is so important.

Young people in care need help to build resilience to overcome the difficulties that they face, rather than being left to develop their own coping mechanisms, which may so often fail them. A key part of our inquiry was listening to the experience of children in care. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael) said, we took evidence from care leavers and foster carers, both in Committee and informally. We met young people in residential care settings and heard about their experiences of mental health provision. Their views informed the report, which is why I urge the Minister to take the recommendations seriously. I hope that the findings of the inquiry will generate greater awareness of the mental health needs of young people in care and the development of a stronger cross-departmental approach, with greater accessibility to mental health care provision for our most vulnerable children.

I have read the Government response. I know that the Minister has long been a passionate advocate for children in care and care leavers. In that context, it was a disappointing response, knowing as I do how much he cares about these young people. I say to the Minister: please do not put the report on a shelf and let it be forgotten. I was concerned to hear my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) say that the Munro report had made similar recommendations, which appear to have been put on the shelf and forgotten. The Children and Social Work Bill is a real opportunity to focus on the mental health and emotional needs of children in care. It cannot be an opportunity that we miss. Children in care need every single opportunity to overcome the challenges that they face. I urge the Minister to do all that he can to ensure that prompt action is taken and the report is not just put aside and left to another day.

2.8 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I thank the hon. Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael) for his sterling good work steering forward these two reports, as chair of the Education Committee, of which I am a member. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for his well-informed speech and his passion and commitment to foster children and to bringing up children in the best way possible. I make special mention of the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan). As part of the Education Committee, I have seen her strong passion for children in care and especially for their mental health.
I find serving on the Education Committee difficult and strange, because I am used to different circumstances. I do not want what I am about to say to be taken as saying that we always do everything better and well in Scotland, but there are significant differences, which it is my job to bring forward to the Minister for consideration.

Improving the lives of vulnerable families and children should be a key priority for any Government, so it is concerning that the Government have failed to take a robust cross-departmental approach to this matter. We are rightly proud of the way we do things in Scotland, but we continue to review the legislation. The First Minister recently announced a major root-and-branch, independent review of how Scotland treats its looked-after children. We welcome the UK Government’s desire to ensure that children in care have the support they need as they move into adult life.

In Scotland, we implement something called “Getting it right for every child”, which is at the heart of everything we do that affects children. It is child-focused, it is based on an understanding of the wellbeing of the child and on tackling early needs, and it requires joined-up working, which is not necessarily happening in England. The Looked After Children (Scotland) Regulations 2009 absolutely embody the framework of “Getting it right for every child”.

I was at the recent Scottish National party conference when our First Minister made an emotional and heartfelt declaration about what she wants to do for Scottish children, but so much has already been done. There is also demand for children and adult mental health services in Scotland, and there are far too many children who are unseen and whose needs are unmet. Our Minister for Mental Health has taken on board the First Minister’s desire to push forward the needs of children—especially looked-after children—and ensure that their mental health needs are dealt with. For example, in the next five years, the Scottish Government will invest £150 million in mental health innovation. Some of that money will be used to cut waiting lists, but £50 million is specifically earmarked to support better access to child and adult mental health services.

The Scottish Government have also doubled the number of psychologists in the services. The Minister needs to look at that, because it is all very well having services, but if they are not accessible or if people—especially children—have to wait too long, further problems will be created that will have to be addressed using Government funds from other places further down the line. It is vital that we support our children across the UK, especially those for whom we are responsible as legislators. When I was a local councillor, I was a corporate parent, so I know about the responsibilities that many people have. It is vital that we properly look after children early in their lives so they do not develop greater issues.

Many children who grow up in care go on to live useful, helpful lives. The staff who work with looked-after children deserve our support and commendation, because many of them do sterling work and improve children’s lives. However, we know that nearly half of children in care suffer mental health issues, half the adult prison population were in care as children and, worst of all, a young person who has been in care is 20 times more likely to be dead by the age of 25 than a young person who has not. Those facts all reflect on the mental health of children in care.

Much more needs to be done to improve outcomes for those in care. The Scottish Government’s review will look at the underpinning legislation, practice, culture and ethos, but that is on top of what they are already doing. They have already pledged to listen to 1,000 young people’s care experiences. That is happening at all levels. It is only by fully engaging with looked-after children, care leavers and those who deliver services on the front line that we will create a care and social work system that gives vulnerable children the very best start in life and the love and care that all children deserve.

The chief executive officer of Who Cares? Scotland supported the First Minister’s pledge to review what is happening for looked-after children, saying: “This review has the mandate to literally save lives. It is a line in the sand. The appreciative nature of this review, with care experience at its core, makes it a global first. Care experienced people will now be integral in the design of a system that will give them a much better chance to not just survive, but thrive.”

As I said earlier, I do not want this to be a “We’re doing better in Scotland” speech. I want vulnerable looked-after children everywhere to be given the help they need. However, I encourage the Government to look to Scotland and emulate the drive and good practice there.

Social work was reformed in Scotland quite a while ago—in fact, I cannot remember the exact date. However, I find it difficult to understand why social work in England falls within the remit of a number of Departments. It incorporates education, health, employment, social security and potentially other areas. Education and health are almost in silos and compete with each other to help families and young children, who are at the core of what they do. It is important that the UK Government have a truly cross-departmental approach to social work reform, because that will ensure that disadvantaged families do not fall off the radar, if for example they are referred by officials in one sector and require support from another.

Although it is encouraging that the Government have undertaken a number of reforms to social work in the light of shocking high-profile failings, such as the baby P case, it is disappointing that the evidence shows that the reforms have not been given sufficient time to be implemented and to mature. That point was made strongly, as I have already said, by the expert witnesses who gave evidence to the Education Committee’s inquiry.

There is a real risk that resources will be exhausted on trying to put into practice new structures, rather than improving existing outcomes. For example, the Committee said in its recommendations that it is not convinced of the need to establish a new regulator, as the Government have already spent too much time changing regulatory bodies. Another change would require a further injection of significant public funds and place an unfair financial burden on individual social workers.

If the structure of the social work sector is badly and hastily implemented, it could have an utterly devastating impact on the lives of real people. I think we all agree with that. We could see catastrophic, and potentially deadly, failings in the system, and risk leaving hard-working social workers to bear the brunt of attacks for failings, as they have in the past. It is all too easy, across the United Kingdom, for social workers to take the blame...
The recommendation was not accepted.

In Scotland, when social work is reformed, the Government take a holistic approach and meet all the bodies concerned. For example, when the Scottish Government implemented “Social Services in Scotland: a shared vision and strategy 2015-2020”, it was just that: a shared vision. The strategy was developed by the Social Work Services Strategic Forum, chaired by the Minister for Children and Young People. Social Work Scotland and the social work regulatory body in Scotland were involved, as were local authorities and the care inspectorate. I could go on. There were many public bodies involved. The strategy represents a strong commitment to working in partnership across organisations and with Government to deliver that vision for high-quality and effective social work. I am sorry to say that, as a member of the Education Committee, I sometimes do not find that shared vision, so I again urge the Minister to work across existing bodies to push forward social work reform to the benefit of the users of those services.

In Scotland, we have had a joined-up way of working for many years and some of the Select Committee’s expert witnesses actually said that, so I urge the Minister to please to look at what we do in Scotland. I am not saying we are a world-beater or that we have the best, but we definitely have a focus and a vision, and we are years ahead in regulation and in working together across all Departments. We want to get it right for every child, which I am sure is also the Minister’s sole objective.

2.20 pm

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I thank the hon. Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael) for opening this important debate, and his colleagues on the Education Committee for their excellent work on the two reports that we are discussing. I of course acknowledge the Minister’s commitment in this area, and I know that he and everyone in the Chamber are dedicated to improving the lives of our most vulnerable children. That is why it is all the more disappointing to read the Government responses to the reports.

The Committee based its recommendations on an extensive body of evidence from experts in the industry—evidence that clearly showed why more action and less talk are needed. In the “Mental health and well-being of looked-after children” report, the Committee rightly recommended that a dedicated mental health assessment by a qualified mental health professional be completed for all looked-after children, so that healthcare professionals and local authorities have a solid and consistent foundation on which to plan the best care for a child.

The report further recommended that all children who need access to child and adolescent mental health services get it in a timely fashion. That makes total sense when we consider that almost every looked-after child has endured some form of trauma, from those who have suffered the most unimaginable brutality to those whose parents, for whatever reason, cannot care for them or protect them from harm. In fact, as the hon. Member for Stroud said, at least 45% of children entering care have a diagnosed mental health condition, and 75% of children in care have some kind of emotional or behavioural difficulty. It is therefore astonishing that the recommendation was not accepted.

The Government’s record overall on CAMHS is dire, with children waiting years for specialist help. With that in mind, will the Minister tell us what the ratio of CAMHS workers to looked-after children in England is, and whether he thinks that the number of CAMHS workers is high enough? Will he also tell us what impact he thinks his Government’s cuts have had on CAMHS overall?

I was similarly disappointed that the Committee’s recommendation that CAMHS be made available to all care leavers up to the age of 25 was rejected. The Government believe that the configuration of local mental health services is a matter for commissioners to decide, on the basis of local need. Even the statutory guidance, however, is clear: decisions on the transition between services should be based on the needs, wishes and feelings of the young person concerned, not the cost considerations of local commissioners. Once a young person turns 18, they are referred to adult mental health services, and we all know that the Government’s record on adult mental health is even more concerning, and that budgets for mental health trusts continue to be slashed.

The Government response does not specifically answer the question of how CAMHS provision will be improved, or how they will tackle the huge waiting lists, which lead to unnecessary suffering. From my own experience, I know that there is nothing worse than working with a child or young person who is desperately crying out for professional help that is simply not available. The social workers and carers who have to deal with these situations day in, day out, have to watch the young person in their care suffer while they feel completely helpless. That is why the Government’s rejection of the Committee’s recommendation that foster carer and residential carer training be supplemented with mental health and emotional wellbeing modules is disappointing. If carers are not fully equipped to do their job, their ability to sustain care for a child can be reduced. That could have a devastating impact on a child, who is left to forge—sometimes many—new relationships with different carers.

I noticed that the Government responses deflected many answers on to the new expert working group on the mental health of looked-after children. I make no criticism of the experts appointed to the group, but further consultation is wholly unnecessary, as the hon. Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) said, especially since both the co-chairs have already submitted evidence to the Committee. Consultation will simply cause further delays, and delay means that more children will suffer unnecessarily. Will the Minister tell us how many children he thinks will be left suffering on waiting lists while that review drags on? Does he accept that the condition of many of them will deteriorate as they wait for services? I have seen that myself in children waiting for long-term fostering or for adoption. A child’s pool of potential carers will decrease as their condition worsens, and as the years go by and he or she gets older, the pool decreases even more. For far too many children, that means never getting to feel the security and stability that long-term fostering or adoption can bring—all because of unnecessary delay.

Heartbreaking as that is, there are far worse scenarios for children in the system, which is why social work reform is so important. The Committee’s report on social work reform makes a number of common-sense
suggestions. I appreciate that the Minister has a difficult job. Getting things right for children and families is not an easy task; it is difficult and complex terrain. Successive Governments have battled with how to provide the best and safest social care system for children, but now there is an abundance of official and other expert advice to draw on, so we should see some action and results—but we do not.

I imagine that the Minister in his response will tell us about the Munro report, the Step Up to Social Work programme, Frontline, the Innovation programme, What Works centres, partners in practice, the intervention regime and “Putting children first”, the Government’s vision for excellent social care by 2020. What the Minister might not speak about is the recent National Audit Office report, “Children in need of help or protection”, because it finds that actions taken by the Department for Education over the past six years to improve the quality of help and protection services delivered by local authorities for children have not yet resulted in services being of a good enough quality, suggesting systemic rather than only local failure.

In fact, the demand for help and protection is rising. Over the past 10 years, there has been a 124% increase in serious cases—one in which a local authority believes that a child may be suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm. Furthermore, the varied spending on social work has been found to be not related to quality. Will the Minister explain why he thinks that all the Government’s initiatives and changes over the past six years are not yielding results? Many of the NAO’s findings certainly echo the Committee’s analysis that there are significant weaknesses in the Government’s agenda, and that the reforms focus on “changing structures potentially to the detriment of the people delivering this key public service.”

What is needed in the social work profession is continuity, stability and confidence, and a Government who can hold their nerve on how best to help children and families by putting in place and embedding good policies. The Government are failing to get the basics right. Those basics are: reducing social worker case loads; preventing experienced professionals from quitting the profession; training social workers in a holistic way; not fast-tracking them, and forcing them to specialise before they have even been trained in the basics; and amending IT and the bureaucratic process across the board to achieve the goal of getting social workers where they want to be—out from behind their desks and seeing the families with whom they work.

It is an absolute must that we start looking after social workers. A new professional body could go some way to assist us in that. It is simply no good demanding excellent social workers and excellent practice if social workers are not appropriately supported, including with safe working environments. Social work is a dangerous profession, with unmanageable case loads, impenetrable bureaucratic structures and poor pay. It makes me angry that social workers are not afforded the same protection and status as other professionals. We all need to remember that for every social worker who becomes unwell and cannot do their job, there are sometimes up to 40 children who lose the help and support of that social worker, who, for many of them, is the only constant in their life. Such a working environment would not be tolerated in Parliament; Parliament should not tolerate it for our social workers. Why will the Minister not implement the Select Committee’s recommendation about the wellbeing of the workforce?

A common feature of the Government’s response to the Select Committee’s recommendations on social work reform was deflection to future initiatives and reports, and future analysis of initiatives that are already in place. All I know about the future is that our children’s futures are at risk under this Government. The overall fact remains that the Government’s response does not tackle the crisis in social work because it does not address how to deal with the significant increase in the sheer number of people accessing the service. To do so, the Minister would need to admit what we all know: that the Government’s closure of Sure Start units and removal of early years help and family support, and their cuts, punitive welfare policies and austerity measures, are impacting everywhere, and nowhere more starkly than in the children and family social work arena, which by its very nature is interlinked with wider societal and economic issues. The Minister does not need to take my word for it; he could listen to the chair of one of the Government’s expert panels, who has said that “investment is welcome, but we have to recognise that is against a backdrop of other financial pressures...and a history of disinvestment across the system for quite a number of years.”

The Opposition welcome the Select Committee’s work, but not so much the Government’s response, or their inability to accept the overall consequences of their policy making, and the drastic impact that those policies are having on everyone, but most importantly, vulnerable children and families.

2.32 pm

The Minister for Vulnerable Children and Families (Edward Timpson): It is a pleasure, as ever, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Gapes. I welcome this debate and the interest that the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Neil Carmichael), has shown in prioritising these issues for inquiry by that Committee.

There is a lot of ground to cover. It is always encouraging to get a ringing endorsement of everything that the Government are doing, but there are clearly still some elements of concern that I need to address. In so doing, I recognise, as others have, that hon. Members who are present share my commitment to improving the lives of vulnerable children. That is our joint mission and the underlying motivation for everything that we do in our privileged roles.

The Government have participated in and responded to the Select Committee’s inquiries, but I want to take the opportunity to provide some further detail and, I hope, reassurance that we have a comprehensive, considered and compassionate plan to help to bring about the improvements that we all want to see to vulnerable children’s lives. I remind hon. Members that in July this year we published our “Putting children first” strategy. I am grateful to the hon. Member for South Shields (Mrs Lewell-Buck) for reminding everyone of that important document, which I believe represents the most thorough and ambitious reform agenda in this area for some considerable time. I am not complacent, and neither is that report, but it is a serious attempt to try to get children’s social care to where it needs to be.
The strategy sets out fundamental reforms across each of the three pillars on which the social care system stands or falls. The first and foremost of those is people and leadership. I agree with the hon. Member for South Shields that we do not want social workers sitting behind computers; we want them to work face-to-face with families to try to improve their lives, and we want to avoid risk-averse behaviours, of which process-driven activity is often a part.

The third and final pillar is governance and accountability. We need to be sure that what we are doing is effective and actually works. We must develop innovative new models for the pursuit of practice excellence, which has to be at the heart of this work, and remain firmly focused on improving outcomes for children. Only by taking action across those three fundamental pillars will we be able to improve, which we must do in a way that does not stifle practice through over-regulation and process-driven activity. Again, I agree with the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) that our system stands or falls on the quality and commitment of the people driving it. The second pillar is practice and the environment that we create for that practice to be able to improve, which we must do in a way that does not stifle practice through over-regulation and process-driven activity. Again, I agree with the hon. Member for South Shields that we do not want social workers sitting behind computers; we want them to work face-to-face with families to try to improve their lives, and we want to avoid risk-averse behaviours, of which process-driven activity is often a part.

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Mrs Lewell-Buck: The Minister may be coming to this, but I am curious: how will the Government measure the success of “Putting children first”?

Edward Timpson: I will come to how we will ensure that we are making progress. Several milestones are set out in “Putting children first”, which is a programme of work through to 2020. We will be able to measure progress by whether inspections of children’s services and our outcome measures for children in care improve, and we will have a whole suite of indicators that will give us a strong understanding of whether the work we have done and the measures we have put in place are having a positive influence.

Over the last six years, we have begun to lay solid foundations for achieving that vision. We have appointed a chief social worker, who has introduced the first definitive statements of child and family social work knowledge and skills. Working across Government with the Department of Health, we have developed the first four teaching partnerships, whereby employers and universities work together to ensure that university courses provide students with the right on-the-job skills. One of the problems in the past—I have seen this for myself—has been that too many social workers have come into practice without any first-hand experience of what it is like to be in a child protection situation. We need to change that.

We have invested almost £50 million since 2010 in Frontline and Step Up, which I make no apologies for mentioning. Those programmes have brought more than 770 high-calibre recruits into social work. We have expanded our assessed and supported year in employment programme to support newly qualified social workers entering the profession. To help the Chairman of the Select Committee on whether ASYE should be mandatory, I can tell him that 151 of the 152 local authorities take part in that course. We will continue to review that and see whether that level is maintained, because we think ASYE is an important part of social workers’ early experience of gaining professional knowledge.

We are under no illusions about the remaining challenges; there is still much more to do. The recent National Audit Office report on child protection performance was a timely reminder that the performance of children’s social care services is still far too variable across the country. We must acknowledge that although many local authorities provide a consistently effective core social work practice, the majority still struggle to do so.

The reviews by Professor Eileen Munro, Sir Martin Narey and David Croisdale-Appleby, among others, have given us a much deeper understanding of the issues faced by children’s social care. They describe a system in which initial social worker training is not universally preparing students for the challenges of the job, as I alluded to, and those already doing it often lack the time, specialist skills and supervision needed to achieve real change for children and families. The reviews also describe a system that focuses too much on management and is governed by prescribed approaches rather than excellent practice, and conclude that services have not always been designed around vulnerable children and that innovation has not been given enough space to thrive.

We are determined to address those challenges, as outlined in our “Putting children first” strategy. Going further and faster on our plan to drive up the skills and status of the children’s social work profession is central to that endeavour. To that end, I am working in partnership with my colleagues in the Department of Health to establish a new, bespoke independent regulator for social work that will set higher standards for social work both in what is expected of professionals in order to practise and in what is expected from universities and others providing initial social work education. It will also create a more rigorous approach to continuing professional development in social work—an area the Chairman of the Select Committee rightly raised—ensuring that social workers continue to develop throughout their careers, as called for in the report. In the past there has been too little recognition of the role this area has to play.

I am also bringing forward a new system of post-qualifying assessment and accreditation for child and family social workers. That is a key plank of our reforms, because it will provide, for the first time, a consistent and well supported career pathway for child and family social workers, which will allow them to deepen their
skills as they take on additional responsibility and, crucially, keep them in touch with practice. One of the problems we can all recognise is that in the past too many good social workers, as they gained experience, rather than remaining close to families and working their own cases, moved into management and behind desks. We therefore lose that expertise and the new crop of social workers coming through do not get the support they could have gained from those experienced social workers if they are no longer working with them.

Practice skill and expertise will be the most highly prized and rewarded asset across the whole career, from newly qualified social workers all the way through to practice leaders. Together, the reforms provide an opportunity and a solid platform from which to raise the status of child and family social work in the way the profession needs and deserves. They create the conditions for a strong, confident social work profession where practitioners are properly supported to thrive in very challenging front-line posts. The profession, and the children and families it serves, should expect no less.

I want to address the point made by the Chairman of the Select Committee about a professional body. It is right to say that over three years the Department for Education, with support from the Department of Health, spent more than £8 million of public money trying to set up the college of social work, but despite that significant investment the college was unable to secure the sufficient membership required to make it sustainable. However, I re-emphasise, as I did in evidence to the Select Committee, that it is important that there is a strong professional body for social work. It has to be sustainable, but also have a sense of ownership by the profession. It cannot be top-down; it has to be a bottom-up organisation. We want to continue to work with the British Association of Social Workers, other representatives of the workforce and the Department of Health to see how we can start to nurture and craft a professional body in that mould so that we have something that truly represents social workers and can go into bat for them when they need that.

It is also important to recognise that giving social workers the right knowledge and skills and setting high standards for practice will not on its own bring about the step change we need. Excellent social workers need to work within supportive and permissive organisations where they are given the flexibility to use their expertise in ways that have the greatest impact on children and families. As Eileen Munro identified, good social work is not about following processes and procedures, but rather than being close to families and working with them.

The Children and Social Work Bill, which is currently before Parliament, includes a new power to innovate. Through that power, we are looking to say that, ultimately, excellent front-line social work practice should be defined not by the Government or Parliament but by local practice leaders, with more freedom to operate within a clear, safe statutory framework. Our “partners in practice” local authorities—eight of the highest-performing authorities—see the power as an important and potentially transformative opportunity.

The power has been criticised by some in the Lords. It is right that we debate that and that the quality of debate in Parliament is strong, but let us have a debate based on facts, not on unfounded propositions. Let me be clear: we do not want to privatise child protection services and we will not privatisate child protection services. Indeed, there are already clear legislative restrictions on the outsourcing of children’s social care functions. It was never the intention to use the power to innovate to revisit those. However, to put it beyond doubt, we are amending the Children and Social Work Bill to rule out any use of the power in that way.

We will not remove fundamental rights or protections from children either. Our aim is to strengthen, not weaken protections. We want to let the best local authorities, led by leading-edge practice leaders, work in ways with more potential to make an actual difference for children instead of watching and waiting, hamstrung by excessive prescription.

I will quote from Eileen Munro, because we still value her views on how we are performing and the work we are doing.

“...I welcome the introduction of the power to innovate set out in the Children and Social Work Bill. This is a critical part of the journey set out in my Independent Review of Child Protection towards a child welfare system that reflects the complexity and diversity of children’s needs. Trusting professionals to use their judgment rather than be forced to follow unnecessary legal rules will help ensure children get the help they need, when they need it.”

She is not a lone voice: the Children’s Commissioner, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives, the Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service, Catch22, Achieving for Children and the children’s social worker all hold similar views.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: The concern about the Children and Social Work Bill seems to be that the Government have been completely unable to say exactly which functions local authorities will be able to opt out of. Bearing in mind that a lot of the functions they have around children protect them from harm and keep them safe, is it not understandable that there is huge concern out there about where the Government are going with that?

Edward Timpson: Perhaps I can give the hon. Lady some examples of primary legislation where local authorities have asked that they be able to use the power to innovate where that is currently restricted in law. Under section 25 of the Children Act 1989, independent reviewing officers must be appointed for every looked-after child and they have to have regular reviews. We know that children often say that they do not like that. There are children who are in very stable placements for whom that can be disruptive and they ask for that not to happen, whereas other children need more intense oversight from an independent reviewing officer. That is one example of where local authorities want to have that flexibility.
There are also some anomalies that I am not sure many people appreciate. For instance, under section 66 of the 1989 Act, any child who is not cared for by a family or a guardian for 28 days counts as privately fostered and as such receives the same duties as other looked-after children, with visits and so on. That ends up capturing children coming over to language schools, which the local authority have to go and visit, to check on their welfare, despite those children being on a foreign exchange trip. Those are just some examples of measures where the local authorities that have shown an interest—we have to remember that this is a permissive power—would want some flexibility, in a safe and controlled environment, to test to see whether there is a different way of providing services that is absolutely focused on improving children's outcomes more than anything else.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Will the Minister give way?

Edward Timpson: Briefly, because I want to make sure I finish my speech. I have not got on to mental health yet.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: Just one quick point for clarity: am I right to assume that the Minister is saying that anything is open as long as the local authority applies to the Secretary of State, or will it be just the two examples he has given? I am struggling to see what exactly is in the mix. This seems to be open to anything.

Edward Timpson: There are restrictions to the legislation that local authorities can apply to be disadvantaged. A local authority has to make the application itself and it has to consult with the local area. It then has to submit that application to an expert group, which will consider it and publish its findings. Even then, there has to be an affirmative resolution in both Houses before that local authority can test out that new way of working. I met the hon. Lady yesterday to talk a little bit about this and other areas of shared interest. I am happy to provide her with more details and I also suggest that we agree to meet again, so we can make sure that all of the information is provided.

The chairman of the Education Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud, raised the issue of trusts, which I will touch on briefly. I in no way think that creating children's social care trusts is a panacea for all ills. In most cases, when a local authority fails it will be able to improve its services with the right support, as is happening in Cumbria, Surrey and Buckinghamshire at the moment. However, where failure is persistent or systemic, it is right that we look carefully at whether the capacity for improvement exists in the local authority. We now have commissioners who go in and undertake a three-month review before reaching their conclusions and recommendations on the way forward.

Leaving services within council control is sometimes found to be the best approach to securing improvement, as in Bromley and Dudley, for example. In other cases, local authorities themselves agree that an independent trust model will create extra improvement capacity and help to turn things around, as is the case in Birmingham and Sunderland. Sometimes, where failure is deep-rooted and an authority does not have the capacity to improve itself, service control must be removed by my Department. I will not apologise for doing that. We cannot simply sit back and watch authorities fail over and over again, year after year, without trying new ways to bring about improvement. There is a growing bank of evidence following recent Ofsted inspections in Doncaster and Slough of services improving following the move to a trust after years of failure. Ofsted has particularly highlighted the strengthening of leadership and management in those trusts, which are critical components of any successful organisation.

To give the Chairman of the Committee an opportunity to respond and conclude the debate, let me now turn to my hon. Friend's interest in the mental health and wellbeing of looked-after children and care leavers. I thank members of the Education Committee for their insightful report and commend them for their ongoing interest in this important area. I know all too well, from my personal experience, the nature of the challenges that children in care often face and the impact that can have on their mental health and the health of those who care for them. That is why my Department is taking strong action to improve support for children in care and care leavers, including the introduction of the staying put duty, so that all young people leaving foster care can continue living with their foster families after the age of 18. More than 50% of 18 year-olds in foster care have taken up that opportunity.

We are also undertaking a national stocktake of foster care to better understand current provision and how needs are matched with skills. I look forward to working with the Education Committee in looking at the evidence it gathers for its own report in this area. We are piloting the staying close programme, which enables young people leaving children's homes to maintain links with those homes, as recommended by Sir Martin Narey's review of children's residential care. We published a new, cross-Government care leavers strategy, “Keep On Caring”, which sets out what we will do right across Government to ensure that care leavers get the support they need and also outlines our ambitions for trialling new and innovative ways of working. We are also taking legislation through Parliament that will, for the first time, define what it means to be a good corporate parent for children in care and care leavers.

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I share the concerns of the hon. Member for South Shields about child and adolescent mental health services. They have been undervalued and underfunded for far too long, and we need to do far more to tackle that. The Government are investing £1.4 billion over the life of this Parliament to drive improvements in mental health services for children and young people. In addition, we are making a specific investment of more than £10 million to support the mental health of young people in secure children’s homes, who are some of the most vulnerable people in our society.

In order to get mental health support for children in care right, the Department of Health and the Department for Education have, as hon. Members have said, established an expert group to ensure that the emotional and mental health needs of children and young people in care and adopted from care and of care leavers are better met. It is a collaboration between social care, education and health colleagues, parents and carers and care leavers themselves. It is a comprehensive piece of work to map out the care pathway for a looked-after child in need of mental health support; it is not just looking at the point of entry into the care system.

The principle of having a mental health assessment for all children being brought into care is instinctively attractive, but I know—and I know others who share this view—that we have to look at each child individually. There will be some children who, at the point they come into care, are still suffering great trauma from an event that has led to them going into care. That is not the right moment for them to have such an assessment. There are other children, such as newborn babies and others, for whom it would also not be appropriate.

The expert group is gathering pace and gathering that evidence. As my noble Friend Lord Nash said on Report, we will take seriously its recommendations. Those may come during the duration of the group’s work and may also include potential changes to legislation. That is a commitment we have made, and we want to make progress and make sure we do not lose this opportunity.

The reports discussed today pose a range of challenges to the Government. I welcome the healthy debate they have generated, because they help to keep the issue at the top of the agenda and maintain the momentum, not just for me and my Department but right across Government. I share the ambition of other hon. Members, and we are united in our commitment to improving the lives of our most vulnerable children. Hon. Members should be in no doubt that I recognise and accept that there remain deep-seated issues we need to resolve, but I and the Government are more determined than ever to show the resolve and commitment needed to rise to those challenges with our clear and ambitious plan for fundamentally reforming the system. Our vulnerable children deserve no less.

2.57 pm

Neil Carmichael: It is a great pleasure to wind up the debate. I thank the Minister for his commitment to the issues we have raised and for the answers he has given to many of our questions. I have no doubt that he is determined to improve the lot of our children in care and of our social work profession as a whole. I am pleased that he referenced Eileen Munro’s focus on judgment and I look forward to seeing that developed further. It is encouraging that he is going to help to nurture and craft a professional body. That is important for social work. We certainly found in Trafford that effective leadership, good training, good continuing professional development and a combination of levels of leadership amounting to a delivery that was unified, transparent and open was extraordinarily beneficial. We want to see that across the whole country to deal with the variance in local authorities that the Minister acknowledged.

My hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) referred to our forthcoming inquiry into fostering. We look forward to hearing from the Minister about the Department’s fostering stocktake. We have written seeking information about that in readiness for our inquiry.

The Minister can be absolutely sure that we will not rest until we see improvement. The work we have done, the fact we have charged the debate, as the Minister acknowledged—we are grateful for that—and also the changes taking place in the Bill currently going through the House, not least Lord Nash’s amendment, are all good signs. I leave the debate with the sure knowledge that the Education Committee believes these matters are important and urgent.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
3 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move, That this House has considered National Arthritis Week 2016.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I am delighted that today, for the first time in five years in this House, there is a dedicated debate in Parliament examining the impact of arthritis. It is a privilege to speak in this House; that opportunity is not something we take for granted. It is good to come along to expound and inform on an issue that is so important. I am very pleased to see the Minister in his place. I think he and I will be in this position many times, debating health issues that interest us. It is good to see right hon. and hon. Members here. I know they will all make significant contributions.

Arthritis, along with musculoskeletal conditions, has a massive impact on people's everyday quality of life. While I am disappointed that we have not spoken sooner in the past five years about this topic, I am pleased that time has been allocated today by the Backbench Business Committee, which I thank, for such an important debate that enjoys cross-party support. Opposition Members seem to be well balanced, and I am pleased to see the hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce), who is always here; I thank her for that and look forward to her contribution.

I should make it clear at the outset that the title of this debate is a slight misnomer, as the National Arthritis Week campaign has been replaced by the “Share Your Everyday” campaign, led by Arthritis Research UK, which is encouraging the public to share their stories of living with arthritis so that research is better targeted at the issues affecting most people with arthritis. We need to break the stigma of talking about pain and loss of dexterity and mobility, so that we can help to alleviate it. I urge Members to show their support for the campaign by sharing their own stories. I know there are Members here today who will do so, and that will be a very effective way of underlining this issue.

We should begin by discussing arthritis, because the burden on the individual is clear and substantial. It brings pain, isolation and fatigue and stops people doing the things that matter to them, keeping them from the world of work, from enjoying leisure time and from spending time with their families. Those are all key issues. I want to thank Arthritis Research UK—some people from it are in the Gallery—for supplying us all with notes and information to help the debate develop. We thank it for the hard work it does.

Arthritis should not be seen as a by-product of old age. For some it is, but for others it is not. The examples that I, along with others, will give show that arthritis is not only an elderly person’s ailment. It affects thousands of young people and millions of working-age people. One in five people over 50 have osteoarthritis in their knee. There is a young girl in my constituency who I was struck by the stories shared on the Facebook page set up for this debate, so many of which are genuinely heart-breaking. One that stood out was that of a young girl of 27 who is waiting for a hip replacement, having suffered from arthritis since she was 20. That underlines, again, that this is not an old person’s disease. It knows no barriers, no age restrictions and certainly no class or creed barriers.

There is also the issue of workplace absence, with 30.6 million working days lost to the economy each year. The indirect cost to the economy of arthritic conditions is £25 billion. We do not necessarily want to focus on the financial aspect, but we can look at the figures as an indication of how important it is to address this issue and to raise awareness through this debate.

The scale of the burden is growing, with an ageing and increasingly physically inactive population. The numbers are sure to rise in the coming years. I briefly want to describe some of the characteristics of arthritis. When we talk about arthritis, we are talking about a number of different musculoskeletal conditions within the categories of inflammatory conditions, joint conditions and fragility falls and fractures, which are key factors.

The first group is inflammatory conditions, such as rheumatoid arthritis, where the immune system rapidly begins attacking the joints in the body. Those conditions affect around 1% of the UK population, including people of all ages, and have serious consequences. The second group is a range of conditions that cause musculoskeletal pain, the most common being osteoarthritis. Some 8.75 million people have sought treatment for osteoarthritis, with the true number of sufferers likely to be even higher. As is often the case, we are just scratching at the surface. The gradual onset means the condition mainly affects the elderly, but 2.36 million working-age people in the UK have sought treatment for knee osteoarthritis. Lower back pain, the most common form of disability in the UK, also falls into this group of conditions.

The final group is osteoporosis and fragility fractures. Osteoporosis is a silent and painless disease, but it causes fragility fractures after falls from standing height that afflict mainly but not exclusively elderly patients. The disease causes weakening of the bones and some 300,000 fragility fractures in the UK per year, of which 89,000 are hip fractures. The impact of those fractures on elderly, frail patients can often be severe, taking away their mobility, independence and, in some cases, their lives. We have to consider that.

Arthritis is not inevitable. Preventive measures must be the focus in tackling it. We need to address the risk factors for arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions. Links between being overweight or obese and long-term conditions such as heart disease, cancer and diabetes are well known—I declare an interest, as a diabetic. I am glad to say that I am almost back to the weight I was before I got married, which is quite something. I am trying to keep off all the sweet things, if I can. However, being overweight or obese is also a major risk factor in
various forms of arthritis. It is the single biggest avoidable cause of osteoarthritis and increases the likelihood of developing inflammatory conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis.

Every one of us, as an MP, is aware of these issues because our constituents come to see us. In many cases, we deal with related benefit issues, and that is how we come into direct contact with people affected by arthritis.

Christina Rees (Neath) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for securing this really important debate. These conditions cause not only physical but psychological problems. A girl came to see me, aged 19. She said:

“Arthritis is unpredictable. It flares up suddenly. Medication problems make it difficult for me to manage. It is hard to explain to my friends why I cannot do something I could do last week, because I look so normal.”

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we have to look at the damage these problems are causing youngsters in their everyday lives, including in how they associate with their friends?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention and for outlining how arthritis can affect people at the age of 19. I am aware of a constituent who is even younger, which really surprises me.

Rising levels of obesity, combined with our ageing society, could lead to a near doubling in the prevalence of osteoarthritis in the UK by 2035. The Government need to make sure that musculoskeletal health is always included in assessment of the population’s health locally and nationally; that the benefits of physical activity for people with musculoskeletal conditions are emphasised in health promotion messages; and that, when programmes targeting lifestyle factors such as obesity and physical inactivity are being designed and delivered, their impact on musculoskeletal health should be explicitly included. So there are many things the Minister could respond to, and I look forward to that.

Above all, the Government need to make sure that effective physical activity services are available locally. This is crucial, and I hope colleagues from all parties will join me in calling for a National Audit Office review of physical activity services for people with osteoarthritis so that services help people across the UK to maintain good musculoskeletal health. We need to address that.

I want to speak about benefits as well. I know about osteoarthritis and rheumatoid arthritis because I have sat across a table from a person helping them fill in disability living allowance forms, now personal independence payment forms. People tell me their story, because we need to know their story when we help them fill in the forms. We need to know what they have done and what they have discussed with their GPs and consultants. The issues are very clear. I know that the Minister is not responsible, but for the record I implore the Department for Work and Pensions to make sure that, when it comes to filling in PIP forms, people have their full medical story told. They need an understanding person at the other end of the phone. I am not being disrespectful to anybody, but sometimes when we phone up about PIP, the person at the other end of the phone does not understand the medical details. I respectfully and gently say to the Government that we need someone on the phone who understands the medical condition and understands the issues and can therefore empathise with the person who does their 10-minute interview at the first stage of their PIP form before they do the full form. I think every MP would recognise that particular issue.

As I mentioned earlier, falls and fractures are a pressing public health issue among older people. Falls are the second greatest contributor to the burden of disability in the UK and a major cause of mortality. Around 300,000 fragility fractures occur each year in the UK, including some 89,000 hip fragility fractures, with 1,865 cases submitted to the national hip fracture database in Northern Ireland. Hip fractures are the most common cause of accident-related death in older people, resulting in some 14,000 deaths in the United Kingdom every year. We know that 20% of hip fracture patients die within four months of their injury and 30% within a year. This is a growing problem. Projections show that by 2036 hip fractures could account for 140,000 hospital admissions in the UK each year, with care and treatment costs rising to £6 billion. Let us put that into perspective and do the sums. Let us address the issue early on and do away with the cost impact further down the line.

We need more joined-up treatment in such cases because, once a first break occurs, it is vital that a second break is avoided. A fracture liaison service, the FLS, which provides targeted assessment and treatment for those with fractures, is widely regarded as the best way to address the problem of preventing future fractures. It is both a clinically effective and a cost-effective solution. Despite this, only 37% of local health services in England have a fracture liaison service. We need local commissioners to ensure that a fracture liaison service is linked to every hospital and held to account for commissioning fracture liaison services that cross the boundaries between health and social care so that the two marry. It is important that it does so. Arthritis may not kill, but it attacks what it means to live. The normality of life will never be the same with arthritis.

The condition limits people in doing the things that matter to them, but with greater personalisation and help in managing their condition, the NHS, care services and our welfare system can help people push back the limits of their condition. Too few people with arthritis currently have a care plan. Many people cannot quickly access physiotherapy without a GP referral, and people with arthritis need more help so that they can be in work, which is where most of them want to be if only that was possible. People with arthritis know how their condition affects them better than anyone else. Personalised and person-centred healthcare is therefore essential to move forward.

Care planning is an approach that people with long-term conditions can use to manage their health and wellbeing. It is based on a two-way conversation with a healthcare professional where goals are shared and actions agreed. If we could arrange that, we could help them. A better system should be in place to make sure that that happens. This can offer important benefits to people with arthritis, yet only 12% of people with arthritis currently have a care plan. If it is only 12%, there is something wrong and we must address that. That number needs to increase if we are to enable more people to manage their condition.
There are other tools that health and care services can use to enable people with arthritis to manage their conditions more effectively. Physiotherapy is a clinically effective therapy that can substantially reduce pain and restore movement for people with arthritis. Again, is it available for everyone? If it is not, it should be. I gently ask the Minister how we can make that happen. I look to the Minister, as I always do, for a sympathetic and understanding response.

Self-referral to physiotherapy is a system that lets people go directly to an NHS physiotherapist without a GP referral. This system is associated with improved health outcomes and patient experience. It is good that it is cost-effective and reduces the burden on GPs. All people with arthritis in Scotland and across much of Wales can already access physiotherapy directly. We have many friends and colleagues here from Scotland, and I know that they will make contributions that I suspect will indicate what is being done in Scotland. I must say I am envious of some of the things being done there. I would love to see those things in place in Northern Ireland and across the whole of the United Kingdom.

In the rest of the UK, for example, only a third of clinical commissioning groups in England offer self-referral and it is still only being piloted in Northern Ireland. That needs to change. When inflammatory conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis strike, delay can be a major risk factor and the clock starts ticking once symptoms develop. Early identification and treatment is needed rapidly to control disease, minimise long-term joint damage and avoid lifelong pain and disability, but the NHS does not currently assess people with rheumatoid and other forms of early inflammatory arthritis—EIA—quickly enough, and national guidelines are not being met. Again, I gently say to the Minister: if the guidelines are not being met, what are we doing to improve that?

A recent clinical audit by the British Society for Rheumatology found that only 20% of people who see a GP with suspected rheumatoid arthritis or EIA are referred to rheumatology specialist services within three days, and only 57% of people referred with suspected rheumatoid arthritis or EIA are seen by a specialist within three weeks. Again, that needs to be addressed and I again look to the Minister for a response on that. Local commissioners across the UK need to achieve earlier diagnosis of inflammatory conditions. Arthritis and other musculoskeletal conditions are the most common diseases in our working population, and as the population gets older, an even greater proportion of workers will have conditions that include osteoarthritis and back pain. Those workers want to keep working, so we have to improve the system of healthcare to enable that.

Many people with arthritis want to work, and they can with the right support. However, only two thirds of working age people with a musculoskeletal condition are currently in work, compared with 74% of those without health problems. What is more, the rate of employment for people with arthritis is 20% lower than for people with no condition. We need better support to enable people with arthritis to work and we need to promote the Access to Work scheme that is in place, which pays for practical support and equipment. It is good that we have such a system, but I want to see better utilisation of it and fiscal incentives for employers to provide health and wellbeing initiatives that promote musculoskeletal health.

It is vital that more is known about people with arthritis so that research can be targeted at what matters most to them, but, worryingly, key data are not being collected. Arthritis Research UK is working to improve the quality and availability of data about the experiences of people with arthritis and about the public services that improve their quality of life. Arthritis Research UK and Imperial College London have developed a model for estimating prevalence using the existing NHS data currently available in England. I encourage all Members for English constituencies to visit the Arthritis Research UK website to get access to the data, which I understand will soon be available in Scotland, and later in Northern Ireland and Wales. We have a lot to do to catch up.

However, not enough data on people with arthritis are being collected, and that limits our understanding of the prevalence of the condition and action that can be taken in response. Moreover, data that are collected are not uniformly classified across the system. Definitions of musculoskeletal conditions used in other national data sets, such as those for benefits, are inconsistent. National survey content may need greater co-ordination. Again, I say gently and with respect that it is a question of how to do things better, and I am speaking on behalf of Mr Betts, because I am conscious that other Members want to speak. I am probably rushing faster than usual, but I hope everyone can follow what I am saying.

A pivotal issue is the need to protect and build the UK’s excellence in medical research, so that researchers can continue working on a cure for arthritis. How important it is to find a cure. The centres funded by Arthritis Research UK have been at the forefront of research aimed at improving the lives of people with arthritis in the UK. It is marvellous and encouraging that they have uncovered breakthrough treatments that push back the limits of the condition. In the 1990s, centres supported by Arthritis Research UK—it has given us all the information—discovered that a molecule called tumour necrosis factor was causing the disruptive auto-immune inflammation of joints. The anti-TNF therapy that they developed has freed millions from the pain and disability caused by rheumatoid arthritis; it was also an inspiration for the field of biologics, medicines that use the body’s own molecules to combat diseases. It is crucial that that work, and the work of all medical research charities, should be supported by the Government in the long term with a real-terms increase in science spending. It is not something for the Minister to respond to, but I would seek his assistance and support on that point.

Within the life sciences sector, substantial investment by medical research charities drives improvements in health and generates wider societal and economic benefits. In 2013, medical research charities invested about £1.3 billion in UK medical and health research, which represents more than a third of all publicly-funded medical research in the UK. The Government have recognised that our science base is a vital national asset—a view that I and all Members present, including the Minister, subscribe to—and they have reaffirmed their intention to make Britain the best place in the world for science. We all support that ambition. It is crucial to uphold that commitment, and I am speaking very quickly.

That would include bolstering the charity research support fund, which provides an uplift to support charity-funded research in universities. It is a marvellous asset,
investing a lot of money in research. That joint funding of research ensures that charitable donations are invested directly in research that meets the needs of people with medical conditions. In 2013, the Government’s £198 million investment through the CRSF leveraged some £833 million of investment by charities in English universities. That is a significant, marvellous, gigantic sum of money to help to find cures. When the House debates rare diseases—and we do our best in these matters—we often refer to the good work done by charities, universities and the relevant partnerships.

Christina Rees rose—

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): Liz McInnes. Sorry, Christina Rees.

Christina Rees: My arthritis is in many ways self-inflicted; it comes from a lifetime of playing sport. I have no cartilage in my right knee, which is severely arthritic. Then there is my lower back—I do not think anything much works any more. Does the hon. Gentleman think that there should be more research on people who have played sport and become arthritic? In this day and age that there should be more research on people who have much works any more. Does the hon. Gentleman think of life. I look forward to hearing the speeches of the Minister. 

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is right and I think many of us recognise what she says. We encourage people who are obese to do more sport. We encourage young people, rather than playing on computers and laptops, as they so often do, to take part in more physical activity. However, we must consider the side-effects of that as well, and ensure that we help with them. I hope that what I have said about responding early has been taken on board. With an early response to signs of deterioration, the hon. Lady might not today be in as much pain; although I can tell her. Members that I have seen her moving around the House, and she moves at some rate. The hon. Lady is obviously not completely restricted, and I say well done to her.

Without the CRSF there would be less funding to invest in world-class research. The UK’s medical research landscape is currently undergoing major change with the formation of UK Research and Innovation through the Higher Education and Research Bill. I expect that the whole House would agree that is crucial that the CRSF should increase in line with charitable investment, within the new research funding system, to safeguard research in the long term.

I look forward to hearing the remarks that will follow in the debate, including the personal experiences of arthritis of Members’ constituents—and perhaps also those of Members themselves. Much more can be done to improve the quality of life of people with arthritis, and to push back the limits of that worrying condition. We have an opportunity in Parliament to play a huge part in ensuring that our constituents get a better quality of life. I look forward to hearing the speeches of the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), and of the Minister.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): The hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) has apologised in advance for having to leave early on account of new Front-Bench responsibilities. It is normal protocol for hon. Members to stay for the whole debate, but on this occasion I accept her apology.

3.26 pm

Lyn Brown (West Ham) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this important debate, and for his excellent contribution. I also thank the charities, such as Arthritis Research UK, that work every day to reduce the suffering brought about by joint disorders.

Last week was National Arthritis Week. The pain of arthritis is often invisible. Trying to explain its constant, chaotic pain to someone who has not lived with it can be very hard. A survey conducted by Arthritis Research UK found that 28% of women with arthritis feel that people do not really understand the pain they face. Despite trying to talk about it, they feel lonely with the disease. That is why today’s debate is so important. By talking about arthritis in this place, we can begin to tell people that they are not alone.

I want to do that in a literal sense, by sharing my experiences of arthritis. In March 2015, we were two months away from a general election, which, as Members on both sides of the House know, is a difficult, stressful and busy time to be a politician. As part of the shadow ministerial team, I was driving up and down the country with my tiny dog Cara in tow, visiting fire stations and sharing Labour’s plans for the future of the fire service. It should have been an exciting spring, sharing a vision that I was passionate about, and introducing my little four-legged friend to a bunch of soppy but very brave firefighters. However, it was made difficult as I had been experiencing mobility problems for quite a while, and it was not unusual for me to be in constant pain and experiencing stiffness. However, until that point I had been able to fight through. I had not considered that I had a condition.

In March, I finally hit a brick wall. I felt completely and utterly drained of energy and could barely walk more than a few steps. I had to drag myself up the stairs of my house by pulling on the bannister. I was unable to stand at street stalls for any length of time, or go canvassing. I contacted voters only on the phone, or at meetings where I could be completely sedentary. I needed help putting on my bra. I felt humiliated, embarrassed and a complete and utter failure. At the worst, I was struggling to stay awake for more than six hours a day. It can be imagined what that did to my mental health. The stress of not being able to fight that election on my own terms was overwhelming. The tiredness and pain were looked after by a specialist, but throughout that period I had no idea whatever of what the problem was. At times like that, the internet is not a best friend. My imagination was in overdrive. Only the support of good friends, comrades, my wonderful husband and my family got me through that election.

Let me be clear. I do not want to come across as some kind of stoic hero. I am not. I cried, mainly in my doctor’s surgery as I was trying to get some answers. The staff must have thought I was completely wet. I found it really difficult to cope with the condition and the demands of work at that time. I know that many people have that feeling, and it is little wonder that musculoskeletal conditions account for one in five working days lost to ill health in the UK.
Despite being referred to my arthritis service in November 2014, it was early May 2015 before I was finally diagnosed with seronegative inflammatory arthritis. I now know that fatigue is very common among sufferers of arthritis due to pain, stress and sleep disturbance. More specifically—this is not very well known out there—fatigue is a symptom of inflammatory arthritis. Chemicals called cytokines are found in the inflamed tissues and cause extreme fatigue.

At that point I was put on a course of methotrexate, which thankfully caused the aggressive nature of the condition to begin to recede, but it was still quite aggressive, and I needed additional medication to get me to where I am now, taking methotrexate and injecting myself every fortnight with CIMZIA, a biological injectable medicine. The pain and restrictive movement have now subsided considerably. A number of colleagues have told me as I walk around the House that I seem to be doing much better, and I am.

When I first met my arthritis specialist, she asked me what my goals were. I said I wanted to be able to walk Cara again, to wear heels and to play tennis, which would be some feat as I have never played tennis before. She laughed and said, “Let’s keep this realistic and start with walking the dog.” I am happy to say that with the support of the NHS I can now walk Cara for over an hour, almost entirely pain-free. At Christmas last year, I bought a pair of blue polka dot shoes as an incentive and a symbol of hope. I have worn them twice and, although they are not as high as those of the Prime Minister, or indeed our former shadow Chief Whip, my right hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster Central (Dame Rosie Winterton), they are a symbol of the progress I am making. What is more, I have just enrolled on a course of tennis lessons, which I will start in March next year, two years after I hit that dreaded wall.

I have had good treatment, advice and support, and I thank my doctors for that from the bottom of my heart. Ten million people in the UK suffer the pain of arthritis and not all are as lucky as I have been. Moreover, I am told that with an ageing population and rising physical inactivity, the number of people living with arthritis will rise. We must make sure that every patient has access to excellent treatment. Due to the high cost of the drugs and the guidelines of the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, most patients have to wait at least a year before they can access the transformative biologics that have made such a huge difference to my life. I had to wait just over a year, and that year was hard.

The wait means that we are not controlling the condition at an early stage or enabling patients to stay active, independent and in employment. Surely this wait is not cost-effective to industry and the economy. I know that this is ultimately an issue for NICE, but making these drugs more widely available will transform arthritis care for many, as it has done for me. Let us be honest: there are problems with traditional treatments. Although methotrexate has been really important for me, it can have long-term negative effects on the liver, but coming off it is certainly not an option for me at the moment. I urge the Government to support research on the long-term effects of existing drugs, and to continue to support vital research into new treatments and life-saving drugs, so that we can help people to live pain-free into old age.

I will be positive: there have been substantial breakthroughs in arthritis treatment as a result of research funded by Arthritis Research UK. They include treatment for rheumatoid and inflammatory arthritis, and treatment to prevent miscarriages in women suffering from antiphospholipid syndrome, which again is something I have. If only I had known a couple of decades earlier.

World-leading scientists, working in British institutions, such as Leeds, Birmingham and Keele Universities, the Kennedy Institute at Oxford, and St Mary’s hospital, London, developed these treatments. The biological treatments I am on have been developed here in the UK. We should be so proud of these achievements, but we must make sure that our medical research sector remains at the cutting edge. Now more than ever, the UK’s excellence in medical research is under threat. Many of us warned before the EU referendum that funding for medical research would be hit if we voted to leave. Vicky Forster, a researcher, wrote in The Guardian: “many scientific disciplines will lose EU funding post-Brexit”.

That is certainly the case with arthritis.

Figures provided by Arthritis Research UK show that between 2011 and 2015 the EU contributed over £2.5 million to its projects. Those researchers have gone on to secure more than £18 million of European funding to support the next stage of their work. It should be a priority for the Government to maintain our world-leading medical research sector. To do this, they need to ensure that overall investment in UK science and research is protected and grown in the longer term.

The risk to research posed by Brexit does not stop at funding. Sir Paul Nurse, director of the Francis Crick Institute, said:

“Science thrives on the permeability of ideas and people and flourishes in environments that pool intelligence, minimise barriers, and are open to free exchange and collaboration.”

Leaving the European Union threatens this melting pot of ideas. In 2014-15, Arthritis Research UK committed more than £30 million to research that was hosted in the UK, but had collaborators in 13 European Union countries. If the Government want to make sure that our medical research sector remains as vibrant as it is, it is important to maintain the current ease with which those involved in medical research are able to travel and work across the EU and the UK.

We should be truly ambitious as a country and aim to expand arthritis research and medical research more generally, not merely preserve what we have. I have been told that structures need to be in place to encourage our NHS clinicians to participate in research. At the moment, this is not possible due to the demands on the NHS and a medical culture that puts research second.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend on making this excellent debate so moving. She shows how important this issue is. She is a living, breathing example of why research is so necessary. She looks 10 years younger than she did last year.

Lyn Brown rose—

Mr Betts in the Chair: I say to the hon. Lady that four other hon. Members want to speak, and there are only 20 minutes left.
Lyn Brown: In conclusion, Mr Betts, I hope that sharing my experience today has helped to play a small part in letting people who live with arthritis know that they are not alone. I was lucky to have good treatment. I can now walk Cara, wear heels and look forward to playing tennis. I want the Government to make sure that the UK remains a world leader in medical research, so that we continue to find ground-breaking treatments and more of the 10 million people living with arthritis can live their lives relatively pain-free.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Betts in the Chair: Four hon. Members want to speak, which means five minutes each. I call Fiona Bruce.

3.39 pm

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): Thank you, Mr Betts. I shall try to speak quickly, but possibly not as quickly as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who I think holds the record in this House. I commend him for leading the charge in calling for this debate and for an excellent speech, in which he made some recommendations that I fully support.

As hon. Members are aware, Arthritis Research UK runs an annual campaign to shine a light on the experiences of people with arthritis, and the stories that have emerged are compelling. They give an insight into the pain, isolation and fatigue that is suffered daily by millions of people throughout the UK and caused by this debilitating disease. The campaign is powerfully titled “Share Your Everyday”. I have also heard stories from my constituency of Congleton of people living with arthritis and the detrimental impact on their quality of life. Time prevents me from quoting all the stories that I have, but I will give voice to one of those people. A lady called Christine Walker has given me permission to share her experience, and I pay tribute to her for her bravery in campaigning over many years, as I now know, to raise the profile of the need for greater support for those who suffer from arthritis.

Christine has severe osteoarthritis. The pain started in her knees when she was in her 30s. By her 40s, both hips were affected and she experienced pain doing everyday tasks such as getting out of the car. In her 50s she started to develop painful nodules on her fingers and had problems gripping objects. It became increasingly challenging for Christine to hold a pen, or a needle to sew. Chopping food was difficult, and paintbrushes slipped out of her hand. She even went so far as to say:

“Sometimes I just wanted to get a knife and chop off the lumps on my fingers; they were so painful.”

Of course, Christine is not alone. As we have heard, Arthritis Research UK states that back pain, for example, is very prevalent. Indeed, in my local authority area of Cheshire East, it is endured by more than 66,000 people—almost 18% of the population. Arthritis Research UK further states that about one in seven people in the UK lives with arthritis. At that national level, three in four people live with arthritis or joint pain. The Daily Telegraph and Arthritis Research UK have indicated in a recent survey that that pain stops them living life to the full. Just like Christine, many people are suffering severely owing to this crippling condition.

As the leading cause of pain and disability, arthritis is estimated to cost the NHS £5 billion a year. As we have heard, one in five people consults their GP about a musculoskeletal problem such as arthritis every year. That equates to 100,000 consultations every day. About 21% of patient visits to GP surgeries relate to arthritic conditions, and that goes up to more than 30% in the over-50s. The prevalence of these conditions is set to rise even further with growing levels of physical inactivity, obesity and an ageing population. That is why I greatly support the proposal from the hon. Member for Strangford that we improve advice to prevent, rather than just try to cure, this disease.

Why does arthritis so often find itself at the bottom of the heap, as far as acknowledgement of medical conditions is concerned, with treatment and care too often inadequate or inconsistent? The first annual report of the national clinical audit of rheumatoid and early inflammatory arthritis, published on 22 January 2016, identifies that although most services offer prompt educational support and agree targets for treatment with their patients, quality standards are not always met, so sufferers like Christine are often told that they can do little more than take painkillers. Unless prompt and decisive action is taken, people like Christine throughout the UK will be forced to continue to suffer terrible pain, isolation and fatigue. We need to accept that arthritis is a common and long-term condition that warrants the kind of treatment, monitoring and support that is available for other conditions. When we speak to people like Christine, it emerges as evident that a major focus must be on greater investment in patient education programmes, equipping and resourcing people to manage their condition better and endure less pain.

I want to relay Christine’s story as I come towards the end of my speech. In 2010, after years of having to rely simply on painkillers, Christine, along with about 250 others with hand arthritis, was invited to join a study funded by Arthritis Research UK at Keele University. It was run by Professor Kryssia Dziedzic at Keele’s Arthritis Research UK primary care centre. The trial tested the effectiveness of exercises; an occupational therapist taught participants strengthening and mobilising movements.

Christine described the experience as life-changing. She was shown how to squeeze out a dishcloth and hold a kettle with two hands, and told about gadgets that would help her to open cans, peel vegetables and slice bread. Tasks she had avoided were possible again. The trial showed her practical ways of coping and made an enormous difference. NICE guidance recommends that those diagnosed with this condition be offered the opportunity to take part in such activities, including self-management programmes. We must ensure that NICE best practice guidelines are met in that respect. Much work is being done, but it needs to be offered much more widely.

I would like to give the last word to Christine and Arthritis Research UK. Christine says, “Taking exercise to help with my arthritis was a life-saver”. A rehabilitation specialist at her local gym in Cheshire taught her how to exercise better. She began a programme to build her muscles and paid more attention to her diet. She says:

“It’s all about strengthening problem areas—quads, hamstrings, calf muscles and the upper body... By doing this, I’m taking pressure off joints and easing pain. And today I keep the pounds at bay through healthy eating, reducing the pressure on my knees and hips... Because I have stayed active, I can keep gardening and have fun with my grandchildren.”

We should be giving that kind of help to everyone in this country.
Arthritis UK Research says:

"We need MPs to speak up for people with arthritis in the debate and call for decisive action so that everybody can live fuller lives with arthritis today, and without it tomorrow."

3.46 pm

Philip Boswell (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I thank everyone who has contributed to this important debate. Arthritis is a disease that affects many; most people know personally someone who suffers from it. I particularly thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for bringing this important issue and debate to the House.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned some of the good work carried out in Scotland. One initiative that is worth mentioning is self-referral for physiotherapy. A multi-centre national trial involving 26 general practices and 3,000 patients in Scotland identified that an average episode of care was more cost-effective when it followed self-referral for physiotherapy than when it followed GP referral. That equated to a saving of 25%. If the initiative was rolled out across Scotland, it would provide an average cost-benefit of £2 million a year. I hope that the Minister is listening.

A common misconception about arthritis is that it is a disease that primarily affects older people—something touched on by hon. Members in the debate. Arthritis affects people of all ages and takes many forms, a number of which, such as rheumatoid arthritis, can begin at a very young age—and, again, that was highlighted by the hon. Member for Strangford. Many individuals in the working-age population face the prospect of managing this long-term degenerative illness while in employment. Arthritis is not always a visible condition, and the prevalence of the disease among the working population can easily be underestimated.

In fact, according to Arthritis Research UK, musculoskeletal disorders are the most prevalent diseases in the UK working population. Worryingly, the statistics indicate that not enough is being done by employers to support employees affected by these conditions. It may be surprising to many people, but musculoskeletal problems cause the greatest number of working days lost; 30.6 million working days are lost each year. Back pain alone costs the economy about £10 billion a year.

Unfortunately, due to a lack of support, only just under 60% of people of working age with arthritis are in work. However, the responsibility to support those with arthritis lies not only with employers, but with the Department for Work and Pensions and the wider UK Government. The role that this Government must play in assisting those with arthritis and other musculoskeletal disorders in the workplace has become even more important with the growth of the gig economy and the prevalence of the disease difficult in a time-restricted interview setting. In a recent survey, almost three quarters of people with musculoskeletal conditions who had a face-to-face work capability assessment said that they did not feel that they had personal independence payments unfairly stopped or reduced after assessments. This is of particular concern for those who struggle with arthritis, which is very much an invisible disability—a point touched on by the hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees). In addition, symptoms can fluctuate in severity, which can make an accurate assessment of the impact of the disease difficult in a time-restricted interview setting. In a recent survey, almost three quarters of people with musculoskeletal conditions who had a face-to-face work capability assessment said that they did not feel that they had received sufficient support to help them get back to work. Clearly, more action needs to be taken.

In summary, no one should have to take redundancy because of a lack of support for a manageable long-term illness. I look to the Minister and his Government to do more to support arthritis sufferers. Let us see whether there is indeed such a thing as a caring Conservative. The test will be in the action of the Government, rather than the words of their spokesperson.

3.52 pm

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts, and an honour to be mistaken for my very athletic hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Christina Rees). I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for championing this debate. I know from my role as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on medical research that this debate on arthritis has been a long time coming, given the five-year hiatus in discussing the issue in this House.

First, I pay tribute to the courage and strength of the 10 million people living in the UK who suffer from the disease of arthritis and musculoskeletal conditions. Secondly, we must celebrate the work, commitment and endeavour of thousands of carers who look after, whether in a personal or professional capacity, those who suffer from this illness.
Mr George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Although I do not, as far as I know, have an arthritic condition, I do have an impacted disc. Frankly, when it flares up, without the support of family members, and in particular my wife, I would be in an impossible situation. It is important that we pay tribute to all those carers and family members who support people with these conditions.

Liz McInnes: I thank my right hon. Friend for that relevant intervention. We must never forget the usually unpaid work that carers do and the vast contribution they make to keeping people out of hospital and saving the NHS money.

As many other hon. Members have done, I also thank Arthritis Research UK for the work it does highlighting the issues around this disease, which affects nearly one in six people in the UK. Arthritis Research UK provides the support that people with arthritis need, such as in-work help and funding for accessibility, social care and medical research. Arthritis Research UK spent £6.6 million on research this year, and during 2014-15, it committed £30.9 million of funding across Europe with its research partners. As many hon. Members have mentioned, it promoted World Arthritis Day, which was last week, and the excellent “Share your Everyday” campaign.

I was fortunate enough to be able to table an early-day motion, which garnered signatures from across the House, recognising the issues and people I have just spoken about. To date, that early-day motion has attracted 44 signatures, and I thank all those hon. Members who supported the motion; hopefully, after this debate there might be more.

Before entering this House, as a biochemist in the NHS, I worked at the forefront of patient care and research and development. The work on arthritis research in the UK is pioneering; it is uncovering new ideas and breakthrough treatments that will end the way in which arthritis limits lives. In the 1990s, it was UK scientists who discovered that a molecule called tumour necrosis factor—one of the cytokines that my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) referred to—was the key molecule causing the destructive autoimmune inflammation of joints that leads to the problems of arthritis. The anti-tumour necrosis factor therapy that they developed has freed millions from rheumatoid arthritis and has also inspired the field of biologics—medicines that use the body’s own molecules to combat diseases. That is something we should be very proud of.

The crucial work of all medical research charities is supported, in the long term, by Government through a real-terms increase in science spending. It is essential that that is continued, and that we back research and development, now and post-Brexit. The Government also need to play their part in supporting medical research funded by charities. The charity research support fund provides an uplift to support charity-funded research in universities and to contribute towards the full economic costs of research—costs such as lighting, heating and maintaining labs. This may seem a minimal ask, but it is the basis and foundation of what scientists, and the laboratories they use, require to continue their vital research.

This joint funding approach ensures that charitable donations are directly invested in research that meets the needs of people with health conditions. In 2013, the Government’s £198 million investment through the charity research support fund leveraged £833 million of investment by charities in English universities. That is a staggering amount; without the charity research support fund, we would have less funding to invest in our leading research.

We must commit to securing continual funding for this, to help those with debilitating diseases.

3.57 pm

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts, and a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton (Liz McInnes). In my time, I want to focus on discussing employment and the personal feelings of people with arthritis, because it is astonishing that only 59% of working-age people with arthritis are in work.

I employ a senior case worker, Pam Wilson, who was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis ten years ago, just after she turned 30. She has spoken to me about the taboos of her diagnosis and how people view her condition as being an old people’s problem, which we know is not the case. Arthritis can occur at any age during a person’s lifetime, can be extremely debilitating and, due to its nature, is not visible to others. Pam has described to me situations where she has been described as being lazy and excluded from certain situations in previous employments, purely on the grounds of her health issues. This situation is faced by many arthritis sufferers.

I would like to hear from the Minister today about how we can increase the number of people with arthritis in work. Can we ensure that employers understand these issues? Can we ensure they are working with trade unions, which know about these issues in terms of dealing with employees who require reasonable adjustments in the workplace? Can we look at the Access to Work programme to help those with arthritis? Can we look at the issue sensitively in terms of work capability assessments?

I visited the drop-in organised by Arthritis Research UK last week, talking about the many misconceptions people have about those with arthritis. Pam Wilson is not lazy; she is a hard-working employee in a hard-working team assisting the constituents of Glasgow South West on a daily basis.

As Pam says: “Yes I have had bad days, some awful days too, but I also have days where I can cope with the pain and medication side effects. It’s all about managing your own expectations of yourself and understanding what your body is telling you. Sometimes though it is other people who don’t understand. They think you’re lazy because you’re not as active as they are, not walking anywhere, not running or cycling places. They are looking at you and think you’re OK. Because people with arthritis do look OK! Time and experience make you put on a face to the world—one that says I’m fine, but inside and behind closed doors we’re struggling in pain, we’re tired. But we still smile and get on with it, grateful that new medications keep us mobile.

Hopefully this debate will make people understand arthritis. Sufferers are always grateful when someone understands the daily struggle, and it takes two minutes to ask how they are and understand their situation. I look forward to the Minister telling us what more can be done to improve arthritis sufferers’ employment prospects and how we can help to prevent and cure this condition.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): I thank the hon. Gentleman for being so succinct in his remarks. I call Martyn Day.
4 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I start by thanking the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) for leading today’s interesting and timely debate. It is surprising that it is the first such debate for five years.

We have heard from many speakers how arthritis affects people, including young people and working-age people, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell). It works in partnership with a range of local organisations, businesses and community groups to promote healthy lifestyles and delivers a variety of activities and events to encourage people to move more and eat better, with the overall aim of reducing childhood obesity.

Key messages of the project include the benefits of a balanced, affordable diet, and encouragement of children and families to be more physically active and spend less time doing sedentary activities. That is not just a Scottish or a UK problem, of course. We have a global ageing population and although the link between arthritis and ageing is well known in our own countries, there are fewer data on how older people in lower and middle-income countries are affected.

What we do know, however, is alarming. The World Health Organisation estimates that 9.6% of men and 18% of women aged over 60 have symptomatic osteoarthritis, and that 25% of those with osteoarthritis cannot perform the major daily activities of life. Taking action internationally is important for the millions of older people who are directly affected, but it also has an impact on the lives of many of those who depend on them. Often older people in developing countries are the main carers of children whose parents have had to leave for work or who have been orphaned due to conflict or illnesses such as HIV.

In conclusion, it is important that we do more locally and internationally to help alleviate these conditions, and we must make preventive measures a greater priority.

4.6 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts.

Today we are debating arthritis and what more can be done to help those who suffer from this terrible health condition. It is very welcome that the Backbench Business Committee allowed this debate to happen today, which is in arthritis awareness week and so soon after World Arthritis Day. I also thank the Members from across the House who secured the debate with the Backbench Business Committee and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for leading the debate this afternoon. He eloquently and clearly set the tone, and I thank him for that.

example, with monthly meetings including entertainment and social events, along with talks on health and other subjects. The group also organises outings, hydrotherapy, and exercise sessions. As a society, we owe a debt of gratitude to groups such as that for the work they do and to everyone else who is helping sufferers.

There is much that can be done for sufferers. One of the most important things is faster diagnosis of conditions such as inflammatory arthritis, as with earlier treatment, they can be controlled better. In Scotland, there is much focus on tackling obesity, both to prevent and to treat musculoskeletal conditions. We must strive to do more to improve diets and encourage physical activity—in saying that, however, I recognise the point made by the hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees) about sport-related conditions.

In my area, a good example is Together for Health—often known as T4H—which is a community-based project that works to promote healthy lifestyles in the Armadale and Fauldhouse areas within my constituency and that of my hon. Friend the Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell). It works in partnership with a range of local organisations, businesses and community groups to promote healthy lifestyles and delivers a variety of activities and events to encourage people to move more and eat better, with the overall aim of reducing childhood obesity.

Key messages of the project include the benefits of a balanced, affordable diet, and encouragement of children and families to be more physically active and spend less time doing sedentary activities. That is not just a Scottish or a UK problem, of course. We have a global ageing population and although the link between arthritis and ageing is well known in our own countries, there are fewer data on how older people in lower and middle-income countries are affected.

What we do know, however, is alarming. The World Health Organisation estimates that 9.6% of men and 18% of women aged over 60 have symptomatic osteoarthritis, and that 25% of those with osteoarthritis cannot perform the major daily activities of life. Taking action internationally is important for the millions of older people who are directly affected, but it also has an impact on the lives of many of those who depend on them. Often older people in developing countries are the main carers of children whose parents have had to leave for work or who have been orphaned due to conflict or illnesses such as HIV.

In conclusion, it is important that we do more locally and internationally to help alleviate these conditions, and we must make preventive measures a greater priority.
As we have heard, this condition can often go unnoticed or ignored by individuals and wider society, and I hope that the awareness work seen this week has helped somewhat in changing that, along with the role that everyone here has played in supporting that culture change. Nearly 10 million people in the UK live with arthritis. The symptoms can vary; there are over 200 known types of arthritis and rheumatic disease. The symptoms include inflammation of the joints, pain, fatigue, stiffness and difficulty moving. It is quite a common misconception that arthritis is a health condition affecting only the elderly, but it can often affect all ages. That is why it is important that we raise awareness, and that more be done to educate the public on the symptoms, and on the support and help that is out there.

However, we must also be aware that, given the ageing population, more people will suffer with arthritis. The number of sufferers is expected to rise by 50% by 2030. It has to be said that the Government’s short-sighted cuts to public health grants will only cause havoc if the proper finances are not put in place to address our nation’s health.

Arthritis may not be a killer, but it does attack the way of life of many people. As has been put so eloquently today, this condition can make life a very painful struggle, with one in 10 people saying that they live with unbearable pain, day in and day out. The words of those who suffer with this condition can make the strongest cases for reminding us just how tough it can be to live with arthritis.

In the words of Sharon— I am not talking about myself in the third person here, Mr Betts—who suffers with psoriatic arthritis, “It’s the forgotten condition that no-one thinks is important. It affects everything. It’s exhausting, depressing and makes you feel angry and frustrated.

It robs you of the life you thought you were going to have, the one you planned with your family. It robs you of a sense of purpose. You can’t do what you want, when you want, it’s unpredictable.

Life has to be adapted and constantly changed. The drugs make you feel sick and depressed and have side effects as long as your arm. It becomes important not to look back at what is lost and make an effort every day to look forward and think positively. But it’s invisible, other people don’t see any of that, you just look a bit stiff.”

Those are extremely powerful words and should be a reminder to us all of how important it is to do more to help those suffering with arthritis.

Hearing the stories and experiences of those who live with the condition is important to help raise awareness. That is why the aim of the awareness campaign “The Future is in your Hands” for World Arthritis Day last week was to highlight the stories of those who suffer. It reinforced the comments made by the chief medical officer back in 2012, who said that osteoarthritis, the most common musculoskeletal condition, is a “generally unrecognised public health priority”.

The Government must listen to contributions of medical experts such as the chief medical officer, and to the expert opinion of those who experience arthritis. They must then act to do more to help those suffering with the condition.

The Government could help to prevent the development of arthritis with preventive measures that relate to obesity and physical activity. Studies have shown that obesity is the single biggest avoidable cause of osteoarthritis in weight-bearing joints. With two out of three obese people developing osteoarthritis, it is important that we seriously get to terms with addressing obesity; that will create an environment in which those suffering with arthritis can flourish, rather than struggle.

One key way to alleviate symptoms and support people who suffer with arthritis is by promoting physical activity, as it has been shown that regular physical activity can be beneficial in helping to reduce the impact of the condition on people’s lives. My hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Christina Rees), who is no longer in her place, pointed out that it was a lifetime of sporting activities—she is a very well-known squash player—that probably caused, or exacerbated, her arthritis. However, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has published clinical guidelines that recommend exercise as a core treatment for people with arthritis, irrespective of the severity of their condition.

We need to know which services are out there, so that we can help people acquire the recommended treatment. That is why it would be beneficial for the National Audit Office to conduct a review into physical activity services for people with arthritis. That would help to ensure that we, as policy makers, have the necessary information to drive the policy agenda, and would help to map areas with a shortfall in support and services for those with arthritis. I hope that the Minister will shed some light on plans to undertake that work. Such an investigation would also be important in the light of the cuts to public health grants under this Government. Those cuts are a false economy, and compound the problems accessing services for people who are seeking to manage and improve their lives.

I quoted the following figures to the Public Health Minister at about this time last week from this very spot, but they are worth repeating to the Minister here today. In the autumn statement, the former Chancellor announced further cuts to public health grants, which amounted to an average real-term cut of 3.9% each year to 2021. That translates to a further cash reduction of 9.6%. That is in addition to the £200 million of cuts to public health grants announced in the 2015 Budget. The Minister must bear those figures in mind when responding to the debate and whenever the Department takes action on public health issues. It really is a false economy to cut funding to already overstretched and burdened public health services, as that will obviously exacerbate the problems with those services in the long term.

The need for further awareness of arthritis and its symptoms was clearly shown in a UK-wide survey of more than 2,000 people conducted by Arthritis Care last year, which found that more than a quarter of arthritis sufferers had waited two years to seek help after their symptoms began. When asked why, some 52% said that it was because it did not occur to them that they could have arthritis, and 28% felt that nothing could be done to address their arthritis. I hope that those who have listened to this debate have heard, loud and clear, that help is out there, and that delaying seeking that help will not aid them or their long-term health and wellbeing. That point was made eloquently
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by my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown), who, I think hon. Members will agree, looks 10 years younger than she did a little over a year ago.

Raising awareness is vital. Last week, world-famous performer Robbie Williams gave a candid interview explaining that he suffers with arthritis and describing the impact that has had on his performance; as a Robbie fan, that concerns me. The more we talk about the condition, and the more that high-profile people, such as the MPs here today, talk about their experiences, the better.

There have been so many eloquent and personal accounts in this debate. I particularly mention the brave and moving account of my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham. She will be playing tennis soon with our own parliamentary tennis champion, Mr Speaker, and I, for one, definitely want a front-row seat for that one. My hon. Friend is a true inspiration to the 10 million arthritis sufferers across the country.

I hope that the Minister has listened not only to the debate and contributions from Members present, but to the voices of those outside this place who have called on the Government to do more for those living with arthritis and the pain that comes with it. There are many ways for the Government to do something, and ideas have come from across the House to steer the Minister in a direction that will help the 10 million people who suffer with the various levels of pain associated with arthritis. Let us hope that this time next year, when we recognise National Arthritis Week again, we will have helped more people to lead a healthier, happier and more pain-free life.

4.16 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (David Mowat): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and the hon. Member for Foyle on leading the charge. I beg your pardon; I meant the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

Jim Shannon: I have more hair than the hon. Member for Foyle (Mark Durkan), but not much more.

David Mowat: Don’t take it as a compliment. It has been a long day.

It seems extraordinary, thinking about some of the subjects we debate, that it has been five years since we have debated this subject in the House of Commons. The debate has been such a pleasure, and I am sure that this hon. Members here will see to it that it is not five years before we debate it again. An objective of having a debate in Westminster Hall is to raise awareness. People watch these things, so it is right that we do that and it is important that we do it again next year.

I have been a Minister for about two months, during which time I have met many people, so it has probably been remiss of me not to have met with Arthritis Research UK yet. I am keen to do that. Its representatives are pushing at an open door if they would like to come and see me. As the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Philip Boswell) said, it is about action, not words. We will organise that meeting if Arthritis Research UK would like it to happen.

Several hon. Members have mentioned the statistics, but I will repeat them because they are so important. Some 10 million people in the UK—one in six of the population—have an MSK condition. The most common, with 3 million sufferers, is osteoporosis. One in six is an extraordinary figure, and there are 200 variations of MSK conditions. One in 10 people in the UK suffers chronic pain as a consequence of arthritis.

The numbers are mind-boggling. Some 20% of GP consultations are due to MSK conditions, and this at a time when our GP services are stretched in Scotland and in England. MSK conditions account for 30% of GP consultations for the over-55s, and some 7.5 million working days are lost each year. This long-term condition alone costs the NHS between £4 billion and £6 billion, so it is right that we are having this debate.

There have been a number of interesting and useful speeches. Westminster Hall is sometimes a better place to debate such topics. The hon. Member for Strangford talked about lifestyle factors and preventive factors, and he and another Member made an interesting point about DWP and PIP. We need to be more joined up in how we deal with some of these long-term conditions, particularly as they become more prevalent. He also talked extensively and knowledgeably about research—he has clearly been well briefed—and about what we are doing.

The hon. Member for West Ham (Lyn Brown) made an excellent speech about her personal experience, and she emphasised the overlap with mental health. She talked about first suffering from this during her election campaign last year. In fact, it prevented her from canvassing. I note that she got 36,000 votes and her vote went up by 6%. I do not know whether those factors are related. Well done on 36,000. We pass on our congratulations and awe at her performance.

Mrs Hodgson: Maybe it was a telephone canvass.

David Mowat: Maybe it was. The hon. Lady also talked about the delays to the start of her treatment and the one-year delay before she got the right drugs, which have been so transformative for her. That is an impressive story.

The hon. Lady also talked about the concerns about the consequences of Brexit. The Government have made it clear that, whatever version of Brexit we end up with, science research will continue to grow in real terms and ongoing scientific programmes will continue. I was a remainer, and we often talk about the money that Europe gives to programmes. She said that £2.5 million was given to a particular programme, which should be seen in the context of the £20 billion that flows in the other direction. The real point is that we understand the need for science and will continue to ensure that that funding happens.

The hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees) made a good intervention about the consequences of sport and the unpredictable flare-ups that she has. She made the interesting point that arthritis can be invisible for much of the time before flaring up. The right hon. Member for Knowsley (Mr Howarth) is right to remind us of the role of carers. I remind Members that we are putting together a carers strategy, which will focus on unpaid carers in particular. That will come out at the end of
this year. We are talking to a number of charities about that because it is important, given the stress and strain on our various systems.

Mr George Howarth: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way and for the thoughtful way in which he is responding to the debate. For the sake of completeness, I should say that my impacted disc results from playing rather over-enthusiastic football in the fourth division of the Liverpool Shipping league, which the Minister will know is not a lofty place to play. Unfortunately many of my sliding tackles were badly mistimed, to my detriment.

David Mowat: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention. The fourth division of the Liverpool Shipping league is probably a higher division than I played in during my very short football career.

Due to the time, I will not refer to every speech. The Scottish National party spokesman, the hon. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), talked about what Scotland is doing on managing obesity and chronic pain. I would like to see England learning more lessons from Scotland’s health system; and, I humbly suggest, vice versa—I also include Wales in that. Health is devolved and we are beginning to do things in different ways. Sometimes things will work well, and sometimes things will work less well. One of the highlights of these debates is to hear what happens in other nations, and those remarks are interesting.

The shadow Minister also gave a good speech. She talked about budgets and health spending, particularly public health spending—she has now been able to tell two Health Ministers about that issue—and it is true that the public health budget was cut. The UK spends above the OECD average on health and adult social care, which has not always been the case. We are not the highest spender—we spend 9.9%, but France and Germany probably spend about one percentage point more—but we are above the OECD average. It matters very much how effectively we spend that money. There are always decisions to be made, and those decisions are sometimes difficult.

What are we doing? I will not be able to answer all the points in great detail other than to say that MSK is a priority because it is so important. MSK is one of the national programmes within NHS England, and in 2013 we appointed a clinical director, a gentleman called Peter Kay, who is running a £5 billion programme covering a number of areas and seven strands of work, which I will briefly run through.

First, we need to ensure good awareness of the signs and symptoms of MSK. That is about public health and things such as the World Arthritis Day and the UK “Share your Everyday” campaign. It is also about the important Public Health England activities that we have heard about. We ran a successful public health campaign on arthritis last year, and we need to maintain that pressure.

Secondly, we need high-quality clinical guidance to diagnose and manage the disease. Thirdly, we need to provide holistic care, support, and planning in partnership with patients. Fourthly, and this is important, we must spread best practice across the NHS—I would go further and talk about spreading best practice across the health systems of all the Administrations within the UK. Fifthly, we have heard a lot today about the benefits of physical activity for MSK patients, notwithstanding some of the issues experienced by the hon. Member for Neath and the right hon. Member for Knowsley. Fitness and exercise are of course a preventive measure for nearly everything, particularly for MSK diseases.

Penultimately, we need to do more to enable people to remain in work and to return to work. Finally, we need to invest in research. Those are the seven streams of activity, and I will talk a little about the one that has been spoken about most today, which is what we are doing to keep people in work. As I said, the points about DWP and PIP were well made, and I will see that that is reflected to DWP Ministers.

Philip Boswell: I am delighted to hear about the open door to Arthritis Research UK, which has been excellent in championing the rights of arthritis sufferers, preventing the onset of arthritis, developing a cure for arthritis and transforming lives. Arthritis Research UK’s work is considerable, and it is worthy of our support. I thank the Minister for his words and his initial actions.

David Mowat: I thank the hon. Gentleman for those words. It occurs to me that I have to give the hon. Member for Strangford time to say a few words at the end. I will write to Members about the various specifics that have been raised. I will now sit down and allow him half a minute or so. I apologise for there being so little time.

4.29 pm

Jim Shannon: I especially thank the right hon. and hon. Members who have made such fantastic contributions—every contribution and intervention has been great. The attendance has also been great. It is genuinely refreshing to have a Minister who understands the issue and is able to respond. We will take him up on his offer to have a meeting with Arthritis Research UK—I thank him for that. I look forward to working on behalf of constituents from across the whole of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

4.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).
Written Statements

Monday 10 October 2016

CABINET OFFICE

Overseas Electors

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chris Skidmore): I am pleased to publish the Government’s plans setting out how we will deliver on our manifesto pledge to remove the current 15 year time limit on British citizens who live abroad registering as overseas electors.

Our proposals will give all British citizens who have lived in the UK a lifelong right to vote in parliamentary elections. They will ensure that all eligible overseas electors are able to register to vote and renew their registration in a convenient and timely fashion while maintaining the integrity of the electoral register and guarding against fraud. The policy will allow British citizens previously resident in the UK but who were not previously registered to vote, or had registered more than 15 years ago, to register as an overseas elector.

The publication of the policy will allow the expatriate community and those with technical electoral expertise to comment. Our aim is to have implemented the policy ahead of the next scheduled parliamentary elections.

The costs of implementing the policy are well within my Department’s spending review bid and funding will in due course be available for local authorities in line with the Government’s new burdens doctrine.

This is one of a number of proposals to make sure our democracy works for everyone. The Government are also encouraging registration in under-registered areas, equalising constituencies, and looking at what can be done to improve access to anonymous registration for those escaping domestic violence.

I am placing a copy of the policy statement in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS166]

CERT-UK: Transfer of Functions

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Ben Gummer): Further to the Government’s statement of March 2016, the transfer of CERT-UK (the Computer Emergency Response Team, UK) functions and staff to the new National Cyber Security Centre has now completed. CERT-UK has ceased operating and will be closed. The new centre, which will open publicly over the coming months, is part of GCHQ and will be the UK’s authority on cyber security. More information on the National Cyber Security Centre will be set out in the Government’s National Cyber Security Strategy which will be published later this year.

[HCWS167]

TREASURY

Lloyds Banking Group: Government Shares

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): Further to the statement provided to the House on 4 December 2015, today I can inform the House that the trading plan to sell the Government’s shares in Lloyds Banking Group has been re-started. This is a further step in the Government’s plan to return Lloyds to the private sector.

I received advice from UK Financial Investments (UKFI) that selling shares through the trading plan represents good value for money for the taxpayer. This sales method has been very successful previously, achieving over £9 billion of sales between December 2014 and June 2016. In total, we have recovered over £16.9 billion for the taxpayer from Lloyds through sales and dividend payments.

The trading plan commenced on 7 October 2016 and will run for a year. Shares will not be sold below a floor price that HM Treasury has determined delivers value for money for the taxpayer and ensures that the Government will get back all of the £20.3 billion that taxpayers injected into Lloyds during the financial crisis. The actual number of shares sold under the trading plan will depend on market conditions.

I can also announce the withdrawal of the Lloyds retail offer. At the current share price, the retail offer would be extremely unlikely to recoup all the money the taxpayers put into the bank. Our plan will get back all the cash taxpayers invested in Lloyds during the financial crisis and leave the bank in a better place to continue the crucial role it plays in supporting individuals, families and businesses up and down the UK.

I will update Parliament with further details at the end of the trading plan.

[HCWS170]

International Monetary Fund: Bilateral Loan

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): Today, the UK completed the signing of a new bilateral loan commitment to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), valued at 9,178.2 million SDRs, equivalent to £10.278 million using exchange rates on 7 October 2016. This bilateral loan replaces one of the same value, which came into effect in February 2016 (HCWS542), and was used to support the UK’s lending to the IMF. The new loan is part of a global initiative to ensure that the IMF is well-resourced. It is vital at this time that we have an IMF equipped to strengthen the resilience of the global economy against risks and uncertainty.

The UK is one of the first countries to sign a new bilateral loan with the IMF, maintaining its leading role within international institutions and in the world economy. The SDR is the unit of account used by the IMF. Its value is calculated daily as a weighted average of the US dollar, euro, renminbi, yen, and pound sterling.

[HCWS173]
Military Operations: European Convention on Human Rights Derogation

The Secretary of State for Defence (Michael Fallon): Over the past decade a series of court judgments have extended the reach of the European convention on human rights to combat zones. This extra-territorial jurisdiction was never envisaged by the convention’s authors.

While the courts have been seeking to reconcile the convention with the long established law of armed conflict (or international humanitarian law), our military personnel have been engaged in operations overseas in support of the international community. They have had to do so in the face of growing legal uncertainty and an unprecedented level of litigation, much of it fuelled by a small number of law firms. In addition to the millions of pounds this litigation has been costing the taxpayer, the resulting uncertainties have been distressing to many current personnel and veterans, and military advice is that there is a risk of seriously undermining the operational effectiveness of the armed forces.

It is for these reasons that the Government through a range of measures are implementing the manifesto commitment to ensure our armed forces overseas are not subject to persistent legal claims that undermine their ability to do their job.

I am today informing the House that before embarking on significant future military operations, this Government intend derogating from the European convention on human rights, where this is appropriate in the precise circumstances of the operation in question. Any derogation would need to be justified and could only be made from certain articles of the convention.

In the event of such a derogation, our armed forces will continue to operate to the highest standards and be subject to the rule of law. They remain at all times subject to UK Service Law, which incorporates the criminal law of England and Wales, and international humanitarian law (the law of armed conflict including the Geneva conventions) wherever in the world they are serving. Therefore any credible allegations of criminal wrongdoing by members of the armed forces will continue to be investigated, and prosecuted within the service justice system.

Meanwhile the Government will continue to work tirelessly to uphold international humanitarian law in armed conflicts and to ensure that the appropriate, time-honoured balance between military necessity and humanitarian concerns—as enshrined in the Geneva conventions—continues to govern armed conflicts throughout the world.

This announcement is an important part of our plan to deliver our manifesto pledge including limiting the length of time that claims can be brought against the Government; strengthening the penalties for firms who engage in vexatious practices; and to reducing the financial incentive for law firms to pursue spurious claims.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mark Lancaster): The Ministry of Defence is required to review their non-departmental public bodies at least once every three years to ensure that they have regular independent challenge.

I am today announcing the outcome of the Triennial review of the Veterans Advisory and Pensions Committees (VAPCs). The review examined whether there is a continuing need for the function provided by the VAPCs and concluded in two stages. The first stage examined the key functions of the VAPCs and the second stage ensured that the body is operating in line with the recognised principles of good corporate governance.

The review concluded that the VAPCs continue to provide valuable impartial advice to both myself and Veterans UK, part of Defence Business Services. In addition, the VAPCs continue to play an important role in furthering the interests and needs of veterans, not least of which is the result of the establishment of forums under the armed forces and community covenants, which continue to generate significant contribution from the public sector, local authorities and military units. Thus the VAPCs are able to sustain clear and relevant value for a range of stakeholders.

[HCWS172]

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

General Affairs Council: 20 September 2016

The Minister of State, Department for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Jones): The General Affairs Council on 20 September was chaired by the Slovak presidency and held in Brussels.

General Affairs Council: 20 September 2016

The General Affairs Council on 20 September discussed the October European Council; follow up to the June European Council; mid-term review of the multiannual financial framework; and the European Commission’s annual work programme 2017.

A provisional report of the meeting and the conclusions adopted can be found at:

Preparation of the European Council (20-21 October)

The Council was presented with the agenda for the October European Council. It is due to discuss migration, trade, and external relations with Russia. The Government made clear that while we remained a member state of the EU, the UK would continue to contribute fully in the preparation of the European Council and advance positions in line with our national interest.

Follow-up to the June European Council

The Council also discussed the conclusions of the June European Council, focusing on migration, jobs, growth and investment, and external relations. Member states called for more practical ways to implement European Council conclusions.
Mid-Term Review / Revision of the Multiannual Financial Framework

The Commission presented its proposal for the mid-term review of the multiannual financial framework 2014-20. The proposal is intended to increase flexibility in the EU budget, focusing on the economy, security and migration. The presidency confirmed this will be a standing item on the General Affairs Council agenda until agreement is reached.

Commission Annual Work Programme 2017

The Commission presented the 2017 letter of intent. During an exchange of views the UK stated that the Commission should prioritise the single market, the digital single market and migration. We also made clear any proposals on defence issues would need careful scrutiny and should not duplicate NATO. The presidency stated its intention to present the Commission with a letter outlining the overall views of member states for it to consider when finalising the 2017 Commission work programme.

Sir Julian King’s appointment

Sir Julian King has been appointed as European Commissioner for the Security Union. He secured the European Parliament’s endorsement when it voted in favour of his appointment on Thursday 15 September. The Council of the European Union gave its approval at the General Affairs Council on Tuesday 20 September. Sir Julian replaces Lord Hill following his resignation in July this year.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Contingencies Fund Advance

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The Home Office requires an advance to start recruitment of the director general of the Office for Police Conduct. This advance is to cover recruitment costs only, as the successful candidate will take up their post following Royal Assent of the Policing and Crime Bill.

Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £15,000 for this new service will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the Home Office. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £15,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Employment and Support Allowance

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Damian Green): I would like to update hon. Members on the main item of business undertaken by my Department since the House rose for conference recess.

When people claim Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and/or Universal Credit (UC) due to a health condition or disability they are required to take part in Work Capability Assessments (WCA) on an ongoing basis to confirm their eligibility. This includes people with the most severe health conditions or disabilities, even though we already know from their initial WCA, and from healthcare professionals, that, short of medical advances, their condition is unlikely to improve.

On 1 October, I announced that that we will stop reassessing people with the most severe health conditions and disabilities. This change will apply to people who have already been placed in the ESA support group or UC limited capability for work and work related activity categories following a WCA and who have the most severe health conditions and disabilities (defined as claimants with severe, lifelong, often progressive and incurable conditions, with minimally fluctuating care needs, who are unlikely to ever be able to move closer to the labour market and into work). The IT changes needed are expected to be completed by the end of 2017. In the meantime, we will be working to ensure these people are not reassessed unnecessarily.

Over the coming months we will work with key stakeholders, including disabled people, disability charities, our health assessment provider, the Centre for Health and Disability Assessments, medical professionals and others to develop a set of criteria, set out in guidance, to switch off reassessments for those that are eligible.

[HCWS169]

[HCWS171]

[HCWS174]
Written Statements
Tuesday 11 October 2016

TREASURY

ECOFIN: 9-10 September 2016

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Mr Philip Hammond): An informal meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council was held in Bratislava on 9-10 September 2016. The Government are committed to leaving the European Union; in the interim, they continue to participate fully in ECOFIN meetings. EU Finance Ministers discussed the following items:

*Future economic policies in the EU*

- Ministers discussed the EU’s current economic policy framework and whether further systemic reforms are needed. Presentations were provided by former Italian Prime Minister and Finance Minister Mario Monti and former Swedish Finance Minister Anders Borg.

*Deepening Economic Monetary Union (EMU)—fiscal pillar*

- An orientation discussion was held on proposals for a euro area fiscal capacity, assisted by Guntram Wolff of Bruegel, Vitor Gasper of the IMF, and Daniel Gros of the Centre for European Policy Studies.

*Taxation—current issues: improving tax certainty and fighting BEPS, tax crime and terrorism*

- Ministers exchanged views on measures to address tax avoidance, tax evasion and tax crime and counter-terrorist financing. Presentations were given by OECD Secretary-General Angel Gurria and State Secretary of the Slovak Finance Ministry Dana Meager.

*Investment plan for Europe*

- The Council discussed the progress of the first two pillars of the investment plan for Europe; the European fund for strategic investment (EFSI) and European investment and advisory Hub. EIB President Werner Hoyer and EFSI managing director Wilhelm Molterer reported on the first year’s functioning of EFSI and the Hub.

ECOFIN: 11 October 2016

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke): A meeting of the Economic and Financial Affairs Council (ECOFIN) will be held in Luxembourg on 11 October 2016. The Government are committed to leaving the European Union; in the interim, they continue to participate fully in ECOFIN meetings. EU Finance Ministers are due to discuss the following items:

*Opening session*

- Ministers will be briefed on outcomes of the 10 October meeting of the Eurogroup and the Commission will present an update on the current economic situation. Ministers will also discuss issues relating to the improvement and implementation of the stability and growth pact (SGP), hold an exchange of views on proposals for a European fund for sustainable development (EFSD), and hear a presentation from the European systemic risk board (ESRB) on the residential real estate sector.

*Current financial services legislative proposals*

- The Council presidency will provide an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

*Fight against fraud*

- The Council presidency and Commission will provide information on VAT-related aspects of the draft directive on the fight against fraud affecting the Union’s financial interests by means of criminal law—PIF directive.

*Banking union*

- Ministers are to discuss the current state of play on the implementation of banking union within the eurozone.

*G20 and IMF meetings*

- Council will follow up on the G20 and IMF meetings which took place in Washington on 6-9 October 2016. The presidency and Commission will provide information on the outcomes.

*Climate finance*

- Ministers will discuss preparations for the 22nd conference of parties to the United Nations framework convention on climate change—UNFCCC—in Marrakesh, 7-18 November 2016, including adoption of draft European Council conclusions.

*European semester 2016—lessons learnt*

- Ministers will exchange views on key challenges and lessons learnt and the way forward for the European semester.

*Joint report on health systems and fiscal sustainability*

- A presentation will be given by the Commission on the joint Commission-EPC report of the health systems and fiscal sustainability. This will be followed by an exchange of views.

*Other business—the Basel Committee’s banking reform agenda*

- The Commission will provide an update on the state of play in ongoing Basel negotiations.

[HCWS177]

DEFENCE

Long Service and Good Conduct Medal

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): I am today announcing that with effect from 29 July 2014, the long service and good conduct medal will be made available to officers who have served 15 years clear of any disciplinary entry on their service record. This meets the intention set out in a written statement which was tabled in the House of Lords at the conclusion of Sir John Holmes’ review of military medals by The Lord Privy Seal (Official Record: http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201415/ldhansard/text/140729-wms0001.htm#1407293500018).

The extension of the long service and good conduct medal to officers means that all currently serving members of the regular armed forces, who have 15 years’ service clear of any disciplinary entries on their service record will have that service recognised.
I am also announcing that the clasp to the medal will be awarded for every further period of 10 years served, again where their service records is clear of any disciplinary entries.

Finally, I am announcing that there will no longer be a permanent bar to anyone receiving the medal. This will ensure that everyone who commits themselves to our armed forces for a significant period will have that commitment recognised.

Tracing its history back to 1830, the long service and good conduct medal is the oldest medal still being awarded to our service personnel. It is therefore right to make these changes and to be able more fully to recognise those who commit themselves to a career serving our country in the armed forces.

[HCWS175]
Written Statements
Wednesday 12 October 2016

TREASURY

National Infrastructure Commission

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Simon Kirby): I wish to update the House on the establishment of the National Infrastructure Commission as an Executive agency, and an associated Contingencies Fund advance.

The purpose of the National Infrastructure Commission is to provide expert, impartial analysis of the long-term infrastructure needs of the country. The Commission reports on high-priority issues and produces an in-depth, independent assessment of the UK’s major infrastructure needs on a 30-year time horizon.

The Government consulted earlier this year on establishing the Commission using primary legislation. The Government consider that the Commission can achieve the same objectives without legislation.

The Government will therefore proceed to establish the Commission on a permanent basis as an Executive agency of HM Treasury. It will operate independently, at arm’s length from Government, and will come into force in January 2017.

The resources for the operating costs of the Commission will form part of HM Treasury’s supplementary estimate 2016-17, which is not expected to receive Royal Assent in the associated Supply and Appropriations Bill until mid to late March 2017. HM Treasury will therefore be utilising the Contingencies Fund to finance the Commission’s operating costs that become payable prior to Royal Assent.

Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £5,000,000 for this new spending will be sought in a supplementary estimate for HM Treasury. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £5,000,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

A copy of the Charter for the National Infrastructure Commission has been deposited in the Libraries of both Houses.

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Site Assessment Industry

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Andrew Percy): On 2 Oct 2015 the SSI steelworks in Redcar was placed into compulsory liquidation and an official receiver (OR) was appointed as liquidator. On 12 October, following no buyer for the steelworks being found, the decision was taken by the official receiver to set about the hard closure of the site.

Since that time the official receiver has been undertaking a protracted liquidation of SSI, and in the absence of an owner, he has been overseeing the safe and secure hard closure of the site. Government, through the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, are currently providing an indemnity to the OR so that he can carry out his duties as liquidator of the company and ensure its ongoing safety and security.

As recommended in Lord Heseltine’s report on the Tees Valley “Opportunity Unlimited”, in order to understand the scale and complexity of the site it is necessary to carry out a number of site assessments, which my Department has asked the Homes and Communities Agency to take forward. These site assessments will help inform: costs to decommission the site, costs to regenerate the site and provide the necessary due diligence to enable the future mayoral development corporation—subject to legislation, local processes and agreement—to take forward the regeneration of the area.

These site assessments do not fall within the current indemnity that Government are providing. Therefore Government will be providing an indemnity to the OR to indemnify him against all liabilities, costs, expenses, damages and losses suffered or incurred by him that are arising out of the site assessments. In the coming months the safe management of the site will move to a new Government-owned company with a new site manager. At this point the indemnity will be transferred to indemnify the new management.

It is not possible at this stage to accurately quantify the value of such indemnity. HMG has considered the risks of this indemnity and I believe the likelihood of such indemnities being called upon is low. The indemnity is limited to liabilities arising as a consequence of the site assessments and the current BEIS indemnity remains in place. If the liability is called upon, provision for any payment will be sought through the normal supply procedure.

As a matter of record I have attached a departmental minute for both Houses explaining the procedure followed and containing a description of the liabilities undertaken.

Attachments can be viewed online at:

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Hong Kong (Sino-British Joint Declaration)

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Boris Johnson): The latest six-monthly report on the implementation of the Sino-British Joint Declaration on Hong Kong was published today. It covers the period from 1 January to 30 June 2016. The report has been placed in the Library of the House. A copy is also available on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office website at:

I commend the report to the House.

[HCWS181]
HOME DEPARTMENT

Justice and Home Affairs Pre-Council Statement

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The first formal Justice and Home Affairs Council of the Slovak presidency will take place on 13 and 14 October in Luxembourg. The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, my hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), will attend the justice day and I will attend the interior day.

The interior day (13 October) will begin with a progress report on the implementation of the European Border and Coast Guard, which came into force on 6 October. As a Schengen measure, the UK does not participate. However, the Government support action by Schengen states to improve management of the external border and will support the European Border and Coast Guard’s operations by mutual consent.

The presidency will then provide a progress report on information technology measures related to border management, including the proposal to introduce systematic checks at the external border and the revised smart borders policy proposal for an entry-exit system (EES). The presidency will also ask the Commission to update on plans for the evolution of the second generation Schengen information system (SIS II) and the forthcoming proposal for an EU travel information and authorisation scheme (ETIAS). We will intervene to support those member states arguing that systematic checks should be the default at all external borders and to argue that future amendments to SIS II should support more effective police co-operation within the EU. As Schengen measures, the UK does not participate in the systematic checks at external borders and EES measures, and will not participate in the ETIAS proposal.

Next on the agenda will be a discussion on migration. This is likely to focus on implementation of the EU-Turkey deal, with updates on the wider migration situation. We will reaffirm that the UK is continuing to play its part to address the migration crisis through our support for practical work to strengthen the EU’s external borders, including hotspots.

Over lunch, the presidency will hold a discussion on progress towards establishing new migration partnership frameworks with five priority countries—Ethiopia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal. We will welcome the emphasis on addressing migration issues as a major element of the European Union’s relations with third countries, but caution against limiting that approach to the current priority countries. We should look strategically at which regions and countries offer the most opportunity for impact, including in the horn of Africa, middle east and Asia.

After lunch, the presidency will provide a progress report on the six proposals relating to reform of the common European asylum system (CEAS). This is likely to focus on law enforcement access to Eurodac and the extent of the mechanism for monitoring and assessing the asylum and reception systems of member states in the EU asylum agency proposal. The UK has not opted into the EU asylum agency proposal and is considering whether to opt into the other five proposals. We will encourage the Council to support easier law enforcement access to Eurodac.

Following this, there will be a debate on a proposal for a common EU resettlement framework. The Government have previously stated that resettlement schemes are best operated at the national level.

Under any other business, the presidency will update Ministers on the third ministerial conference of the Prague process, in which the UK does not participate, and on the progress of current legislative proposals.

The justice day (14 October) will begin with a progress report and policy debate on the proposal for a directive on the fight against fraud to the Union’s financial interests by means of criminal law (PIF directive), with a view to endorsing the development of a compromise that would bring serious VAT fraud within the scope of the directive. The UK has not opted in to this proposal on the grounds that it would infringe on member states’ competence to control their own taxes.

The presidency will seek member states’ support for a partial general approach on the European Public Prosecutor’s Office (EPPO). The UK will not participate in an EPPO.

Under any other business, the Commission will provide information on combating hate crime in the EU, specifically on the framework decision on racism and xenophobia, in which the UK does not take part as our law provides similar levels of protection, and the presidency will update the Council on current legislative proposals.

Over lunch, the presidency intends to discuss the role of Eurojust in relation to counter-terrorism. We will make the point that the UK values the work of Eurojust in helping to co-ordinate investigations and prosecutions, including counter-terrorism cases, but clearly any activity should be within its remits.


The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): Today, I am publishing the 2016 report of the Inter-Departmental Ministerial Group on Modern Slavery. This group acts as a national rapporteur for the purposes of Article 19 of the European directive on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims. The report sets out an assessment of the scale of modern slavery in the UK and outlines the actions being taken to combat it. The report covers the whole of the UK and has been drafted in collaboration with the Northern Ireland Executive, the Scottish Government and the Welsh Government.

A copy of the report will be placed in the Library of the House and also made available on the gov.uk website.
Written Statements

Thursday 13 October 2016

TREASURY

Banking Act 2009: Reporting

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Simon Kirby):

The Treasury has laid before the House of Commons a report required under section 231 of the Banking Act 2009 covering the period from 1 October 2015 to 31 March 2016. Copies of the document are available in the Vote Office.

[HCWS187]

UK Bilateral Loan to Ireland: Statutory Report

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr David Gauke):

HM Treasury has today provided a further report to Parliament in relation to the bilateral loan to Ireland as required under the Loans to Ireland Act 2010. The report relates to the period from 1 April 2016 to 30 September 2016.

A written ministerial statement on the previous statutory report regarding the loan to Ireland was issued to Parliament on 26 April 2016, Official Report, column 36WS.

[HCWS188]

DEFENCE

Call-out Order for the Reserves to Counter the Threat of Daesh

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mike Penning):

With the expiry of the call-out order made on 20 September 2015, a new order has been made under section 56(1B) of the Reserve Forces Act 1996 to continue to allow reservists to be called into permanent service to support defence engagement activities—for example the provision of short-term training teams and military capacity building overseas; global counter-terrorism and counter-piracy; maritime security objectives and the operation of our permanent joint operating bases (PJOBs) in the south Atlantic islands, British Indian Ocean Territory, Cyprus and Gibraltar.

Under the orders made on 20 September 2015, 492 reservists have been called out —171 for defence engagement, 125 for global counter-terrorism and counter-piracy, 51 for maritime security operations and 145 for the operation of PJOBs. We anticipate a continued requirement for reservists, with the right skills and experience, over the period the new orders will be in force.

For operations that fall outside the scope of these orders, for example military aid to the civil authorities, or warfighting, or for operations which are likely to involve a large number of reservists, I would expect to make separate call-out orders.

These new orders take effect from the beginning of 30 September 2016 and shall cease to have effect at the end of 29 September 2017.

[HCWS190]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Government Wine Cellar: Annual Statement

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan):

I have today placed a copy of the annual statement on the Government wine cellar for the financial year 2015-16 in the Libraries of both Houses.

Following the outcome of the review of the Government hospitality wine cellar in 2011, this fifth annual statement continues our commitment to annual statements to Parliament on the use of the wine cellar, covering consumption, stock purchases, costs, and value for money. The wine cellar has been self-funding since 2011-12, through the sale of some high-value stock and payments made by other Government Departments for events organised by Government hospitality.

The report notes that:

- Consumption by volume fell by 32% in FY 2015-16 due to fewer Government events, particularly during the general election period;
- Sales of stock amounted to £40,390 (cf. £71,050 in FY 14-15);
- Further funds from other Government Departments added £15,848 to the overall receipts (cf. £21,514 in 14-15);
- Purchases amounted to £40,177, a reduction of some 43% (cf. £70,432 in 14-15);
- The highest consumption level by volume was again of English and Welsh wine, at 44% of the total (cf. 44% in 14-15).

Attachments can be viewed online at:
http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2016-10-13/HCWS186/
Foreign Affairs Council: 17 October

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs will attend the Foreign Affairs Council on 17 October. 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 Luxembourg.

The agenda for the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) is expected to include the European global strategy, external migration, Tunisia, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Ministers will have a discussion on Syria over lunch.

European Global Strategy

EU Foreign Ministers will discuss the follow-up to June’s European global strategy, including the security and defence implementation plan. The UK remains committed to European security and will engage constructively in these discussions, including ensuring complementarity with NATO.

Migration

Ministers will discuss migration issues. We expect an update on progress establishing partnership frameworks, currently focused on co-operation on migration, with five initial priority countries—Ethiopia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal. The UK welcomes the comprehensive approach envisaged under the partnerships, including tackling the root causes of irregular migration. We will continue to argue that the EU must also look strategically at the regions and countries which offer the most opportunity for impact, including in Asia, to deliver the most effective and sustainable response to the migration crisis.

There is also likely to be discussion of the follow-up to the UN high-level meeting on large movements of migrants and refugees and President Obama’s Refugee summit in New York in September. The high-level meeting, hosted by the UN Secretary-General on 19 September, agreed the New York declaration for the comprehensive approach envisaged under the partnerships, including tackling the root causes of irregular migration. We will continue to argue that the EU must also look strategically at the regions and countries which offer the most opportunity for impact, including in Asia, to deliver the most effective and sustainable response to the migration crisis.

There is also likely to be discussion of the follow-up to the UN high-level meeting on large movements of migrants and refugees and President Obama’s Refugee summit in New York in September. The high-level meeting, hosted by the UN Secretary-General on 19 September, agreed the New York declaration for the comprehensive approach envisaged under the partnerships, including tackling the root causes of irregular migration. We will continue to argue that the EU must also look strategically at the regions and countries which offer the most opportunity for impact, including in Asia, to deliver the most effective and sustainable response to the migration crisis.

Tunisia

Following the recent publication of the Joint Communication on EU support for Tunisia, Ministers will discuss the country’s economic and security challenges. The Joint Communication proposes to increase the EU’s financial assistance and activity in governance, civil society, tackling unemployment and corruption, and other measures. We expect discussions will also cover options for increasing support on trade and the implementation of economic reforms, in the context of Tunisia’s International Investment Conference in November. Ministers will debate the ambition for increased EU activity, and whether the measures set out by the EU are appropriately focused.

Democratic Republic of the Congo

Discussions will focus on the EU response to the political impasse and recent violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The European External Action Service is preparing a co-ordinated EU response to press the DRC Government to respect fundamental freedoms and human rights, as well as to pressure them to set a date and timetable for presidential elections in 2017. We are aiming for an agreement in principle on sanctions on figures in the DRC security forces that are responsible for suppression of fundamental freedoms and abuse of human rights. This would be to influence the Government and security figures to respect human rights and focus on finding an inclusive political solution to avoid further bloodshed over the coming weeks and months, especially around 19 December when President Kabila’s democratic mandate expires.

[HCWS185]

TRANSPORT


The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Andrew Jones): The High Speed Rail (Preparation) Act financial report is published today under Section 2 of the High Speed Rail (Preparation) Act 2013. The report covers the period from 1 April 2015 to 31 March 2016. A copy of the report will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS183]

Rail

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport (Chris Grayling), is today announcing that rail passengers will soon be able to claim compensation if their train is more than 15 minutes late under an improved compensation scheme.

Delay Repay 15 will be introduced within months on GTR services, including Southern, and then rolled out across the country. Passengers will be able to claim 25% of the cost of the single fare for delays between 15 and 29 minutes. The existing compensation thresholds will apply for delays from 30 minutes with passengers able to apply for compensation through the train operating company.

Following its introduction on GTR services, Delay Repay 15 will be rolled out across the network starting with the new South Western, West Midlands and South Eastern franchises.

All franchise competitions let by the Department will include requirements to introduce this policy and the Department will explore opportunities to roll this out for all DFT franchises this Parliament.

Delay Repay is currently operated by the majority of operators and a number of existing franchises, including Virgin Trains West Coast and c2c, have also taken steps to introduce automatic compensation for certain ticket types.
The existing Delay Repay thresholds are as follows:

• 50% of the single fare for delays of 30 to 59 minutes;
• 100% of the single fare for delays of 60 minutes or more;
• 100% of the return fare for delays of two hours or more.

As well as Delay Repay, the introduction of the Consumer Rights Act 2015 on 1 October strengthened the right of passengers to claim compensation for poor service.

[HCWS184]
BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Competitiveness Council

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Jesse Norman): My noble friend, the Minister of State for the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has made the following written statement:

I represented the UK at the recent meeting of the Competitiveness Council in Brussels on Thursday 29 September.

The Council started with the regular competitiveness check-up. The Commissioner for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs, Elżbieta Bienkowska, outlined the challenges faced by start-ups and scale-ups in Europe, particularly in comparison to businesses in the US. In the subsequent exchange of views, the key themes were the need to advertise available sources of funding for start-ups; the lack of access to risk capital; and the importance of providing effective support at regional and national levels. A proposal for a joint meeting of competitiveness and ECOFIN Ministers to discuss this issue was met with broad support. I intervened to express support for the focus on scale-ups and shared an example of UK best practice through the British Business Bank.

The next item was the collaborative (sharing) economy. A Commission presentation was followed by discussion in which several member states stressed the need for collaborative economy businesses to respect existing legislation and tax compliance. I intervened to support the Commission’s vision, as outlined in the recently issued guidance. As part of my intervention I highlighted initiatives by organisations such as Sharing Economy UK (SEUK) to promote responsible growth within the sector.

The next item was a presentation on the standardisation package. The core element of the package is the voluntary joint initiative on standardisation, which brings together all the actors of the standardisation community. A large number of standards-setting bodies and industry representatives signed it in June. The majority of member states signed it in the margins of the Council. I signed on behalf of the UK.

Over lunch, Ministers were joined by Jean-Louis Marchand, President of the European Industry Construction Federation (FIEC) to discuss the construction sector. There was agreement on the importance of the construction industry to the EU economy and the need to increase investment in the sector, including through the use of existing financial instruments. The role of digitisation was recognised, as was the need to remove barriers in the internal market. I highlighted a number of UK initiatives, such as building information modelling (BIM) and smart meters, where digitisation has been used to support innovation in the sector. I also cited the forthcoming services card (formerly known as the services passport) as an important mechanism to support the provision of cross-border services. Commissioner Bienkowska said that the card needed to tackle both regulatory and administrative barriers if it was going to add real value.

The afternoon session started with a discussion on the European steel industry. It focused on EU action since the start of the steel crisis in 2014. Commissioner Bienkowska said that she had been working closely with the Commissioner for Trade, Cecilia Malmström to alleviate the impact of the pressures faced by Europe’s steel industry. She said that a level playing field was needed to make the industry fit for globalisation and highlighted the problems caused by global overcapacity and dumping. Many member states called on the Commission to bring forward its proposal on market economy status for China as soon as possible, with reform of the EU emissions trading system, energy costs and the circular economy also recurring themes. I intervened to welcome the establishment of the global forum on steel, as agreed at the G20 in September 2016.

The next item was a discussion on industrial policy in Europe. Several member states called on the Commission to commit to an ambitious and proactive industrial strategy in its forthcoming 2017 work programme. The Commission welcomed the initiative by highlighting all the work that was on-going to support industry. This was followed by an item focused on Europe’s transition to a low-carbon economy, on which no member state intervened.

The Slovak presidency then introduced the item on the unitary patent and the Unified Patent Court (UPC). The Commission noted that only two further ratifications were needed to bring the UPC into effect, and highlighted the urgency with which this was awaited by business. I intervened to commend the work that has gone into the UPC and said that the UK was actively looking into resolving the legal and practical challenges quickly and would provide a further update at the next Competitiveness Council.

The penultimate item was an update on a May conference on the challenge of balancing plant breeders’ rights with patent rights. The Commission noted that any solution should not re-open the biotech directive, but was working on guidance to clarify its effect.

Finally, the Commission presented on the proposed review of the supplementary protection certificate (SPC) regulation, specifically the introduction of the SPC manufacturing waiver. While some member states intervened to highlight the importance of the waiver, others outlined their misgivings, arguing that the right balance already exists between the rights of brand-name and generic pharmaceuticals manufacturers.

EDUCATION

UNCRC

The Minister for Vulnerable Children and Families (Edward Timpson): The UK state party is a proud signatory of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and today I want to reinforce this commitment.

The articles under the UNCRC set out a vision that all children—regardless of background or circumstance—develop their full potential, free from hunger and want, neglect and abuse. These principles reflect our own drive and commitment to social mobility and the ambitious reforms we each lead to ensure that Britain is country that works for everyone.

The 5th periodic reporting cycle with the United Nations convention concluded in June 2016. The UN Committee scrutinised the UK state party’s progress in implementing the CRC since our last report in 2008, and in July 2016 published their concluding observations.

I welcome these concluding observations. They recognise the great strides we have taken to make sure that all children have the opportunity to flourish and grow. For example, efforts taken to improve mental health services,
improvements to law to ensure that children live in safe and loving environments, improvements to supporting and protecting asylum-seeking children and ensuring that all children have access to high-quality education. Indeed, all Government Departments play a role in building a society where everyone has fair and equal opportunities to go as far as their talent and their hard work will allow. And our policies recognise that children are far from secondary in this vision.

Alongside the celebration of our achievements, the Committee also offered recommendations on areas that require additional attention or greater push for change. As we each look to our ambitious programmes of reform to make sure that Britain is a country that works for everyone, I encourage you to reflect on these recommendations; for example, by reflecting the voice of the child fully in the design and implementation of policy.

Both the UNCRC articles and concluding recommendations serve as a helpful and important guide to making sure that our policies—whether they hold direct or indirect consequences—consider children.

My Department will issue the Committee’s concluding recommendations across Whitehall this week. I encourage all Departments to read these recommendations and take them into account as we work together to achieve social mobility. [HCWS194]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Environment Council

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):

I am attending the EU Environment Council in Luxembourg on the 17 October, along with my hon Friend the Minister of State for Climate Change and Industry (Nick Hurd MP).

Following adoption of the agenda, the list of “A” items will be approved.

Under legislative activities the Council will debate proposals for a regulation on binding annual greenhouse gas emissions reductions by member states from 2021 to 2030 and on the inclusion of greenhouse gas emissions and removals from land use, land use change and forestry into the 2030 climate and energy framework.

Under non-legislative activities, the Council will aim to adopt Council conclusions on the convention on biological diversity and sustainable water management.

The following items are due to be discussed under Any Other Business:

- 28th Meeting of the Parties (MOP 28) to the Montreal protocol on substances that deplete the ozone layer (Kigali, Rwanda, 10 to 14 October 2016).
- Communication on decarbonisation of the transport strategy.
- 17th Meeting of the Conference of the parties (COP 17) to the convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) (Johannesburg, South Africa, 24 September to 5 October 2016).
- 39th International Civil Aviation Organisation Assembly (Montreal, Canada, 27 September to 7 October 2016).
- Unspent funds from the New Entrants Reserve (NER300) funding programme.
- Natural resources management on the example of Białowieża Forest: repercussions for Europe.

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION

General Affairs Council and Foreign Affairs Council (Trade)

The Minister of State, Department for Exiting the European Union (Mr David Jones): The General Affairs Council (GAC) on Tuesday 18 October is expected to focus on: preparation of the October European Council; legislative programming and the inter-institutional agreement (IIA) on ‘better law-making’; and the mid-term review of the multiannual financial framework.

I will also represent the Government at an extraordinary meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council (Trade) dedicated to the comprehensive economic and trade agreement with Canada (CETA).

Preparation of the October European Council

Ministers will discuss the draft conclusions of the European Council. The European Council itself will take place on Thursday 20 and Friday 21 October. The agenda covers migration, trade and EU policy toward Russia; this item will include a discussion on Russia’s recent actions in Syria. The UK will play a full part in the discussion on these issues both at the GAC and at the European Council.

Legislative programming and the inter-institutional agreement on ‘Better Law-Making’

In April this year a new inter-institutional agreement on better law making was adopted. One provision of this is that following the adoption of the Commission Work programme by the Commission, the Commission, Council and European Parliament will issue a joint declaration setting out the top priorities and objectives for the year ahead. The Slovak presidency is expected to update Ministers on the process surrounding the joint declaration.

Multiannual financial framework

This will be a follow-up to the introductory discussion that took place at the last GAC on 20 September. Final decisions will be taken later in the year.

Comprehensive economic and trade agreement with Canada (CETA)

The presidency has also scheduled an extraordinary meeting of the Foreign Affairs Council in trade formation with a view to agreeing Council decisions on the signing, provisional application and conclusion of the comprehensive economic and trade agreement with Canada (CETA), before it is sent for deliberation by the European Parliament and for full ratification by all EU member states. CETA is an important trade agreement for the UK in terms of the economic benefit it will bring to British businesses while we remain a member of the EU. [HCWS195]
HEALTH

Healthcare Safety Investigations

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr Jeremy Hunt):

“There is a culture within many parts of the NHS which deters staff from raising serious and sensitive concerns and which not infrequently has negative consequences for those brave enough to raise them.”


The NHS has an excellent track record in recruiting and developing the very best—the brightest, the most dedicated and the most caring. Our staff have a passion for providing the highest quality care that they can, and a commitment to continuously improving their knowledge and their skills. We must not forget that what staff learn through the experience of giving care is at least as valuable as what they are taught in the lecture theatre. Learning through experience is the key to improving the quality of people’s care. This includes learning from mistakes.

We need to create the right conditions to enable staff to learn from their experiences, including their mistakes. All too often, they tell us that there is a culture of blaming, not learning. That is why the Government want to change the atmosphere in which NHS staff work.

There is a strong connection between ‘psychological safety’ and a culture of learning within an organisation. In a true culture of learning, staff can feel confident they will be treated fairly, and patients and families can be assured that errors and the causes of them will be fully explored. Creating and sustaining this broader culture of psychological safety and learning is down to leaders and managers in the system. For them to be able to do so, the Department of Health, as steward of the health system, needs to set the right conditions for such a culture to flourish.

Recent inquiries have illustrated that staff need to feel more confident that the information they give to safety investigations, which have the sole function of learning from errors, will not be used unfairly. That is why we are proposing to create a “safe space”—a statutory requirement that information generated as part of a safety investigation will be kept confidential and will not be shared outside the investigation’s boundaries, except in a number of limited circumstances.

This is used currently by the Air Accident Investigation Branch (AAIB), where investigators are able to offer this safe space to those they speak to, thanks to the robust statutory framework in which they work, arising from regulation-making powers in primary legislation. A key aspect of this statutory framework is the duty not to share information given in the course of an investigation with any other individual or body, unless (usually) there is a High Court order.

The proposal outlined in this consultation is to create a statutory prohibition on the disclosure of material obtained during certain health service investigations unless the High Court makes an order permitting disclosure, or in a limited number of other circumstances.

This broadly mirrors the regime followed in the area of air accidents investigations. It would allow the investigator to say to staff involved in incidents:

“This investigation is not to attribute blame. The information you give me as part of this investigation will not be passed on to those not involved in the investigation unless there is a High Court order, or if the information you provide demonstrates to me there is an active and ongoing threat to patient safety represented by the practice or actions of one or more individuals that requires action”.

The safe space approach is designed to improve patient safety standards over time, by enabling clinicians to discuss openly and honestly their experiences, including aspects of care that ought to be improved. These are valuable lessons that others can learn from, and will improve standards, potentially across the whole system. By concentrating on finding these more widely applicable lessons, safe space investigations will address themes rather than re-examine specific cases. But should the investigation uncover evidence of immediate risks to patient safety, criminal activity, serious misconduct or seriously deficient performance then the police or relevant professional regulator will be informed and will take the appropriate immediate action.

Creating a safe space is also a difficult balance to achieve—between reassuring staff that the information they give will not be passed on, while also reassuring patients and families that they have the full facts of their, or their loved one, care. We all want the standard of that care to get better and better each year. The purpose of this consultation is to seek the views of patients, the public and the professionals who work in the NHS about our proposed approach. In particular, we want to find out from them about what needs to be changed, added, or strengthened in order to achieve the learning not blaming culture that will underpin quality improvement in the NHS.

Attachments can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications.

[HCWS191]
Written Statements

Tuesday 18 October 2016

CABINET OFFICE

Cabinet Committees and Ministerial Responsibilities

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Ben Gummer): Today the Government are publishing an updated list of Cabinet committees and implementation taskforces. It includes three new committees, chaired by the Prime Minister, to oversee this Government’s strategic priorities and deliver our manifesto commitments.

The Economy and Industrial Strategy Committee will oversee the development of a new industrial strategy, ensuring that all parts of the country and all of our citizens see the benefits of economic growth; and will drive work to address the UK’s longstanding productivity issues. The EU Exit and Trade Committee will oversee work to withdraw the UK from the European Union and develop a new relationship between the UK and the EU; and oversee our plans to promote the UK as a place to do business and trade with, drive inward investment, and, in time, negotiate trade agreements. The Social Reform Committee will oversee social policy reforms, and drive the Government’s work to increase social mobility, deliver social justice, and make Britain a country that works for everyone, not just a privileged few.

These will sit alongside the National Security Council and the Parliamentary Business and Legislation Committee, which will continue to serve the same purpose as previously. The nine sub-committees announced today will support the process of collective agreement across Government. The list also includes details of seven implementation taskforces, which will monitor and drive delivery of important cross-cutting priorities.

An updated list of ministerial responsibilities has also been published today.

Copies of the associated documents will be placed in the Library of the House and published on: http://www.gov.uk. The list of ministerial responsibilities will also be sent to each hon. Member.

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Supporting Troubled Families

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones): I am pleased to announce the publication of the “National Evaluation of the First Troubled Families Programme” which ran between 2012 and 2015.

The programme was set up in 2012 to work with a minimum of 116,000 families with multiple and complex problems who had previously been failed by services.

This evaluation reveals the true scale of families’ problems, finding that families each had an average of seven serious social problems including issues of: drug and alcohol abuse; mental and physical health problems; domestic violence; debt; truancy; antisocial behaviour and unemployment.

Our own data show that more than 116,000 families on the programme saw their lives improve—more children attending school, youth crime and antisocial behaviour significantly cut and, in more than 18,000 cases, an adult holding down a job for three months or more.

The evaluation reports provide additional detail on how the programme benefited families. For example, in-depth interviews with the families found that they reported increased confidence as a result of the programme’s intensive “whole family” help, which they rated as better than the services which had tried to intervene before.

The evaluation also finds that the programme helped improve and join up local services for families by encouraging a single key worker approach to work with the whole family on all of its problems.

There are also important lessons in the reports that are being taken on board for the new troubled families programme which will work with up to 400,000 more families by 2020.


ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species: 17th Conference

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The 17th Conference of the Parties to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES) took place in Johannesburg between 24 September and 5 October 2016. CITES is a vital international mechanism for protecting some of our most precious yet vulnerable global wildlife.

Having attended the conference, I can report it was a great success, delivering strong agreements to protect some of the world’s most iconic species. I am pleased that much of this action was driven by the UK.

For example, the UK led negotiations on African lions which saw the trade in wild lion bones banned and the establishment of a new CITES taskforce.

We also chaired discussions on rhinos, resulting in investigative action into failures to halt rhino horn trafficking in key destinations. A proposal to allow trade in rhino horn was also rejected.

Perhaps most significantly, and in recognition of the peril facing many elephant populations, the conference voted against a resumption of trading in modern day ivory, in line with recent domestic UK action. There was also a clear direction to close national ivory action plans which help combat ivory trafficking in key markets.

In addition, global rules on hunting trophies were enhanced, with export permits now mandated for almost all species listed as endangered.
The many victories for global wildlife are too numerous to detail, with action also delivered for pangolins, as the world’s most trafficked mammal, the African Grey Parrot and species of sharks amongst others.

Vitaly, while CITES deals with the legal trade in species, illegal wildlife trade was also a strong focus, with agreements reached on increased global co-operation, and intelligence sharing to boost efforts to reduce demand for wildlife products and tackle corruption. This agreement is crucial as we look towards the Hanoi conference on the illegal wildlife trade which will bring together global leaders in November to push further action. Following on from the ground-breaking London Conference, the UK is providing funding and advice to Vietnam in hosting this latest conference, assuring the illegal wildlife trade’s place at the top of the global political agenda and delivering on our manifesto pledge to continue to lead the world on this issue. The Secretary of State Andrea Leadsom will lead HMG’s delegation to the conference, which will also be attended by HRH the Duke of Cambridge. Their presence at this vital time will show that the UK continues to be at the forefront of global action, pushing for an end to this brutal trade.

UK leadership in this area is clear. At home, we are tackling wildlife crime through our National Wildlife Crime Unit, which will receive £1.2 million of funding over the next four years. Abroad, the British military is delivering anti-poaching training to rangers in Gabon, home of Africa’s largest population of forest elephants. We are also investing £13 million in projects around the world to support communities and boost law enforcement through our illegal wildlife trade challenge fund, including specialised interception tracking courses to protect rhino and elephant populations across sub-Saharan Africa.

Decisions made in recent weeks will have a real impact in safeguarding some of the world’s most vulnerable species. The UK has been at the forefront of driving this and we will remain committed to protecting global wildlife for generations to come.

**[HCWS198]**

**Hydrofluorocarbon Greenhouse Gases**

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Dr Thérèse Coffey):** I would like to update the House on the outcome of the recent United Nations Montreal protocol negotiations in Rwanda.

I am very pleased to report that a deal was agreed among the 197 parties to the protocol to phase down hydrofluorocarbon greenhouse gases (HFCs) over the next three decades.

The Montreal protocol, agreed in 1987, is already seen as one of the most successful environmental treaties ever agreed, having phased out 98% of the ozone depleting substances that would have caused major damage to human health, agriculture and the wider environment. That included chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and hydrochlorofluorocarbons (HCFCs) which were used in products such as refrigeration, air conditioning and aerosols. As a result, the ozone layer is showing the first signs of recovery.

The replacements for CFCs and HCFCs—hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs)—while not damaging the ozone layer, do still have a global warming potential thousands of times greater than carbon dioxide. The growth of refrigeration and air conditioning in developing countries means HFC use could have amounted to as much as 11% of global greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.

HFC alternatives are increasingly available and the UK had, before this weekend’s agreement, already taken the lead in committing to cut usage by 80% by 2030—amongst the most ambitious phase downs in the world. The deal in Rwanda means the rest of the world is now following suit, bringing major benefits for the climate and levelling the playing field for UK businesses.

It is estimated that this deal will reduce cumulative emissions by the equivalent of between 60 and 70 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide by 2050, which equates to the output of around 600 coal fired power stations operating between now and 2050. In turn that is likely to avoid close to 0.5 degrees Celsius of global warming by the end of this century, making it possibly the single biggest step that the world could have taken in achieving the Paris climate agreement goal of keeping temperatures well below 2 degrees.

The UK negotiating team played a central role in the discussions, influencing the strategy of like-minded countries to achieve an ambitious outcome and chairing the legal drafting group, which worked ceaselessly to turn the political agreement into legal text, then clarified and defended it through the final night of negotiations.

The key elements of the deal are as follows.

Developed countries will meet the following phase down commitment:

By 2019, production and consumption of HFCs will be reduced by 10% relative to the amount of HFCs produced or consumed in the years 2011 to 2013, plus an additional allowance of 15% of the baseline used for their phase out of HCFCs.

By 2024, the amount will be reduced by 40% and then by 70% by 2029, 80% by 2034 and finally 85% by 2036.

All developing countries, except India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, The United Arab Emirates, Iran and Iraq will meet the following phase down commitment:

By 2024, production and consumption of HFCs will be limited to 100% of the average amount of HFCs produced or consumed in the years 2020 to 2022, plus an additional allowance of 65% of the baseline used for their phase out of HCFCs.

By 2029, this amount will be reduced by 10% and then by 30% in 2035, 50% in 2040 and finally 80% by 2045.

Production and consumption established before 2020 will be eligible for financial support from developed countries to help with the transition to low global warming alternatives.

India Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, The United Arab Emirates, Iran and Iraq will meet the following phase down commitment:

By 2028, production and consumption of HFCs will be limited to 100% of the average amount of HFCs produced or consumed in the years 2024 to 2026, plus an additional allowance of 65% of the baseline used for their phase out of HCFCs.

By 2032, this amount will be reduced by 10% and then by 20% in 2037, 30% in 2042 and finally 85% by 2047.

Production and consumption established before 2024 will be eligible for financial support from developed countries to help with the transition to low global warming alternatives.

Certain Gulf countries and others with high average temperatures will be able to exempt large scale air-conditioning from the phase down requirements if they believe suitable alternatives are not available for their climates.
There will be a review of the availability of technologies which use alternatives to HFCs in 2022 and every five years thereafter to inform any necessary adjustments to the phase down schedule. There will also be a review four to five years before 2028 specifically to consider whether those countries which have to cap HFC production and use by 2028 need a compliance deferral of two years due to faster HFC growth than anticipated.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

1980 Hague Convention on Child Abduction

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): The Government have decided to opt in to the European Commission’s proposals for the acceptance by the member states, in the interests of the EU, of the accession of Kazakhstan, Peru and the Republic of Korea to the 1980 Hague Convention on the civil aspects of international child abduction.

All EU member states are party to the 1980 Hague Convention, the primary civil law international instrument which provides a mechanism to seek the prompt return of wrongfully removed or retained children to their country of habitual residence.

When a country wishes to accede to the convention, it is necessary for an existing contracting state to accept that country’s accession before the convention can apply between them. It is the European Commission’s view that there is exclusive competence on the EU for all matters relating to the 1980 Convention and that therefore member states must be authorised by the EU to accept accessions by third countries and must do so collectively through Council decisions.

Although not anticipated in the proposals, the Government believe that the UK opt-in under the protocol to Title V of the treaty on the functioning of the European Union applies and they have therefore asserted their right to choose whether to opt-in and have decided that it is in the UK’s best interests to do so.

The Government have taken this decision notwithstanding the fact that they dispute the Commission’s claim to exclusive competence.

The Government believe that the wider significance of these proposals for external competence mean that it is in the UK’s interests to participate fully in these negotiations, including having the ability to vote. These proposals must be agreed by unanimity within the EU Council.

OSCE Informal Ministerial Council

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, my right hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Boris Johnson) attended an informal meeting of Foreign Ministers of participating states of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), held in Potsdam, Germany on 1 September 2016 at the invitation of German Foreign Minister and OSCE chair-in-office, Frank-Walter Steinmeier. Nearly all 57 OSCE states were represented, around 40 of these by their Foreign Ministers.

Foreign Minister Steinmeier called the meeting to discuss both current security challenges in the region and the OSCE’s future role and agenda. A number of common themes emerged over the course of the meeting. Many Foreign Ministers, like the Foreign Secretary, highlighted resolution of the crisis in Ukraine, and restoration of Ukrainian sovereignty as the most pressing priority for the OSCE. Strong support for the work of the OSCE’s special monitoring mission (SMM) was evident, with the chair-in-office leading many speakers in condemning the obstruction of SMM operations and intimidation of monitors.

As well as conflict prevention and resolution, other themes that emerged as high priorities for many OSCE participating states were protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, and reducing the risk of military accidents and incidents. A strong desire was evident on the part of most states to restore respect for OSCE principles and commitments, many referring to Russia’s illegal annexation of Crimea and military intervention in the Donbas in this context.

On the eve of the Potsdam meeting, Foreign Minister Steinmeier published proposals relating to conventional arms control in Europe. Updating existing confidence and security building measures in this field is a UK priority and, we believe, is needed urgently to reduce the risk of military accidents and incidents. We will continue to work closely with Germany and other partners to push for such modernisation as well as for respect for the spirit and letter of these instruments. Implementation of all commitments is a prerequisite for building trust and restoring confidence between the participating states of the OSCE.

In the margins of the Potsdam meeting the Foreign Secretary had many bilateral meetings and conversations. These included exchanges with his Ukrainian and Polish counterparts, and with OSCE secretary-general, Lamberto Zannier. He expressed strong UK support for the work of the OSCE’s autonomous institutions when he met Michael Link, director of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and Dunja Mijatovic, the representative on freedom of the media. In his various meetings the Foreign Secretary commended the Baroness Falkner of Margravine, the UK candidate to head the OSCE’s third autonomous institution, the High Commission on National Minorities.

In this first encounter as Foreign Secretary with the OSCE, the Foreign Secretary noted the potential, as yet not fully tapped, of the organisation’s uniquely comprehensive approach to security and a participation that reaches from Canada to central Asia. The discussions in Potsdam helped clarify priorities for the coming weeks, months and years. We now need to focus our efforts on tackling them together with robust determination.

Relations between the UK and Argentina

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Sir Alan Duncan): I would like to update the House on the current state of relations between the United Kingdom and the Republic of Argentina following my recent visit to Buenos Aires.

After more than a decade of difficult relations under Argentina’s previous Government, the election of President Macri in November 2015 paved the way for an improvement
in our relationship. It is in the UK’s interests to strengthen ties with Argentina. Argentina is the world’s 25th largest economy and has considerable natural resources. A more constructive relationship will enhance the UK’s prosperity.

Since December the Government have taken positive steps towards resetting our relationship by focusing on areas where both states can benefit. The Prime Minister has committed to move our relationship with Argentina into a more productive phase.

During my visit to Buenos Aires—the first by a Foreign Office Minister since 2009—I agreed an historic UK-Argentina joint statement establishing closer co-operation across our bilateral relationship. This includes ambitions to: increase trade links; identify new investment opportunities; strengthen cultural ties; co-operate in the fight against corruption and organised crime; and increase links in the fields of science and technology.

Our position on the sovereignty of the Falkland Islands remains unchanged. The UK will always support the right of the Falkland Islanders to determine their own future.

The joint statement secured important benefits for the Falkland Islanders. We committed to work together on areas of mutual interest in the South Atlantic. Argentina agreed to take appropriate measures to remove any obstacles limiting the economic growth and sustainable development of the Falkland Islands, including in trade, fishing, shipping and oil and gas. We also agreed that Falkland Islanders are free to set up further flight connections with other countries in the region, with a monthly stopover in Argentina. Both sides expressed support for the recently confirmed project to use DNA examination to identify the remains of unknown Argentine soldiers buried in the Falkland Islands.

The Government will explore ways to build on these positive first steps and consider how the UK can best maximise the opportunities offered by an improved relationship with Argentina.

[HCWS199]
Written Statements

Wednesday 19 October 2016

COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government (Mr Marcus Jones):

On 26 February 2015, the then Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government and the then Secretary of State for Education, having considered the report of the inspection by Dame Louise Casey CB and the advice note from Sir Michael Wilshaw (HM Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills), concluded that it was both necessary and expedient for them to exercise their intervention powers, as Rotherham metropolitan borough council was failing to comply with its best value duty. Due to the extent and the gravity of the failings in the council, my right hon. Friend the Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles) rightly decided that the intervention should be broad and wide ranging. It was directed that commissioners should exercise many of the authority’s functions until the council could exercise them in compliance with its best value duty. A team of commissioners was appointed to exercise all executive functions of the authority, as well as some non-executive ones, including licensing.

On 11 February 2016, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) returned certain functions to the council, including education, housing and planning. He was satisfied with the progress made and that the council was able to exercise the identified functions in compliance with the best value duty. Returning these functions was the start of building effective and accountable political leadership and represented a clear milestone on the road to recovery. I am pleased now to be able to report on further progress made.

In his 10 May and 11 August 2016 progress reports, Lead Commissioner Sir Derek Myers recommended that the licensing functions should be returned to the council and laid out strong and compelling evidence for this. The collective evidence demonstrates that the key objectives of the intervention, in relation to licensing, have been delivered. It is my assessment that the weaknesses in licensing identified in the Casey report have been addressed and the service is now functioning effectively. Officers and members have recognised the need for and implemented fundamental cultural change, and advisory board members, in particular the chair, are more capable and confident in their role. This marks significant progress, as licensing was one of the council’s services implicated by the Casey report as contributing to child sexual exploitation in Rotherham.

On the basis of this progress, I am now satisfied that the council could exercise the licensing function in compliance with its best value duty and I am consulting on revising directions accordingly. The commissioners will continue to have oversight of the service to ensure continued compliance with this duty.

I am placing a copy of the documents associated with these announcements in the Library of the House and on my Department’s website.

[HCWS204]

EDUCATION

Primary Education

The Secretary of State for Education (Justine Greening):

The Government are committed to building a country that works for everyone and that means having the highest aspirations for all children. But we know that when it comes to their education, if a child starts behind other children, all too often they stay behind. When children leave primary school they should have acquired a firm grasp of the basics of literacy and numeracy. I know that all parents and teachers want this for our children too.

Summer 2016 saw the first pupils taking the new assessments in English and mathematics at the end of primary school. They were set against the new national curriculum which has been benchmarked against what the highest-performing countries around the world are teaching their children. As a result, the new assessments rightly raised the bar on what we expect pupils to have been taught by the age of 11, better preparing them for secondary school and beyond. In the past, although we saw high proportions of children meeting the previous lower standard at the end of primary school, too often it did not translate into good qualifications at the end of secondary school.

Although the new assessments this summer were rightly more challenging, teachers and pupils rose to that challenge. Sixty-six per cent. of pupils met or exceeded the new “expected standard” in reading, 70% did so in mathematics and 74% did so in writing.

The pace and scale of these changes has been stretching. Our objective is to make sure that children are ready for the next stage of their education. We know, and Ofsted inspectors understand, that the 2016 assessments and results mark a break with the past and are not comparable with the preceding years. In recognition of this, I am reaffirming the commitment that no more than 6% of primary schools will be below the floor standard in 2016.

It is right that we do more to identify schools where pupils are not fulfilling their potential and 2016 saw a greater emphasis on pupil progress in the accountability system. To take the next step, we are laying regulations around “coasting”, so that schools not making enough progress get the focus and support that they need to improve. We expect a small proportion of primary schools to be defined as coasting this year.

Because of the changes to primary assessment, I want to be clear that no decisions on intervention will be made on the basis of the 2016 data alone. Regional schools commissioners and local authorities will work together with the current leaders of the small minority of primary schools below the floor or coasting to help and support the schools to move forward in a positive direction.

It is important that we now set out a clear path to a settled system where our collective focus can be on achieving strong educational outcomes for all children. There has been significant change in recent years, but
the timeline from this point will bring greater stability, with no new national tests or assessments introduced before the 2018-19 academic year.

As part of this I am setting out steps to improve and simplify assessment arrangements. First, we have worked closely with the profession to improve the guidance for the moderation of teacher assessment. It is important that we have a consistent and reliable approach across England. This new guidance will be accompanied by mandatory training for local authority moderators. Secondly, the key stage 1 grammar, punctuation and spelling test will remain non-statutory for schools this year, with tests available for teachers to use if they choose. Thirdly, we will not introduce statutory mathematics and reading resits on children’s arrival in year 7. Rather, we will focus on the steps needed to ensure a child catches up lost ground. High-quality resit papers will be made available for teachers to use if they wish, as part of their ongoing assessments. In addition, we will introduce a targeted package of support to make sure that struggling pupils are supported by teachers to catch up in year 7.

While the steps set out above will make improvements in the current academic year, we also need to now set out a longer-term, sustainable approach. Early in the new year we will launch a consultation on primary assessment and the implications for accountability. This will cover key issues, including the best starting point to measure the progress that children make in primary school, and the role and operation of teacher assessment. While we take time to consult on assessment arrangements, the early years foundation stage profile will remain in place for the 2017-18 academic year.

Last year, the Government commissioned Diane Rochford to lead an expert review into the assessment of pupils working below the standard of the national curriculum tests and to make recommendations that ensure they have the opportunity to demonstrate attainment and progress at primary school. I am grateful for the work of Diane Rochford and her team and we are publishing their report today. Its recommendations will also form part of the consultation.

I look forward to engaging with parents, teachers and unions on these issues in the coming months.
Written Statement

Thursday 20 October 2016

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria

The Secretary of State for International Development (Priti Patel): I would like to update the House on my attendance at the fifth replenishment conference of the global fund.

The fifth replenishment conference took place on 15 and 16 September in Montreal, Canada. The conference was hosted by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and brought together participants from Governments, the private sector, civil society and non-governmental organisations to raise funds for the fight against the three diseases—HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria—up to 2020.

At the conference, I announced that the UK would make £1.1 billion available to tackle these three diseases. Our investment will help the global fund to save eight million lives, avert 300 million infections, and help build resilient and sustainable systems for health.

To support the fight against malaria, I structured our investment to increase contributions from the private sector by agreeing to double private sector contributions to the global fund for malaria up to a maximum of £200 million.

I also made it clear that the UK, as an engaged, outward-looking nation, has a duty both to the people we are trying to help and to the UK taxpayer to ensure the aid system is as effective as possible. I therefore announced that, starting with the global fund, I will be rolling out performance agreements with all major organisations in order to challenge, change and reform the global development system so that it properly serves the poorest people in the world. We will therefore use our investment to secure a step change in the global fund’s performance to ensure every penny of UK taxpayers’ money is achieving the maximum possible impact. As a result, I have agreed a new £90 million performance agreement with the global fund, which is based on delivery in 10 key areas of improvement, including increasing the impact of our investment by ensuring the most vulnerable and hardest to reach parts of society receive the support they need, by rooting out corruption and inefficiency and by focusing resources on countries with the least ability to pay.

By helping to free developing countries from the burden of the three diseases, we are not only saving lives; we are boosting economies and helping countries leave aid dependency behind to become trading partners of the future. But ending the three diseases as epidemics by 2030 is an enormous challenge. Britain has a proud record as a global leader in development and following the referendum result, we now have the opportunity to further build on our place in the world. UK support to the global fund over the next three years will:

- Fund 40 million bed nets to tackle malaria;
- Provide enough lifesaving anti-retroviral therapy for 1.3 million people with HIV;
- Support the treatment of 800,000 people with tuberculosis.

Overall, the replenishment conference was a success, raising pledges worth US $12.9 billion, which will go towards tackling the epidemics of AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria for the period 2017-19. The conference raised nearly $1 billion more than the previous replenishment conference in 2013.

The UK will hold the global fund and key donors to their commitments to ensure the UK’s investment achieves the maximum possible impact, while rolling out this new approach to performance agreements for future aid spending.

I am aware of the significant degree of interest in this issue from Members across the House, whose advice and support on this issue has been invaluable for the Government. For the convenience of Members, I am depositing a copy of the performance agreement in the Libraries of both Houses.

Attachments can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2016-10-20/HCWS205/
**Successor Submarines**

The Secretary of State for Defence (Sir Michael Fallon): I am pleased to announce that the next generation of nuclear-armed submarines will be known as the Dreadnought class, and that the first is to be named HMS Dreadnought. Construction of the first submarine formally began on 5 October 2016.

Dreadnought is a name with an excellent historical pedigree, traditionally used for powerful and innovative ships and submarines at the leading edge of technology and is a fitting name both for the class and the first submarine of that class. There have been nine Royal Navy vessels of the name, the most recent being Britain’s first nuclear-powered submarine, launched on this day, Trafalgar Day, in 1960 following her build at Barrow. The new Dreadnought submarines continue Barrow’s long association with submarine construction.

These submarines, the first of which we expect to enter service in the early 2030s, will replace the current Vanguard class submarines as the ultimate guarantee of our nation’s safety.

**Tuberculosis**

There was support from member states for an EU framework on tuberculosis (TB) which would also include hepatitis B and C and HIV given the significant overlap between the conditions. There was also agreement on the need to share information, to work with the eastern neighbourhood and support for a civil society forum. Current work was outlined, including the EU joint action on TB, the European Commission contribution to the Global Fund and the World Health Organisation (WHO) TB action plan. The UK updated the meeting on the new UK national strategy on TB, which takes a multi-sectoral approach and complements the WHO strategy. The UK also highlighted links with AMR.

**Vaccination**

During a discussion about how to increase vaccine uptake across the EU, the UK highlighted work undertaken to increase vaccine coverage in the UK — including through action on shortages, communication campaigns and through forecasting and planning. The UK supported further international work on the issue and, with other 4, agreed on the importance of sharing information. The UK also mentioned links between increased vaccine uptake and tackling AMR.

**AOB**

The Czech Republic invited Ministers to a joint ministerial meeting on health and the environment in Ostrava on 13-15 June 2017. There was also an item about European Commission work on patient safety. [HCWS208]

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**Justice and Home Affairs Council**

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Amber Rudd): The first formal Justice and Home Affairs Council of the Slovak presidency took place on 13 and 14 October in Luxembourg. The Minister for Policing and the Fire Service, my right hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), attended justice day and I attended interior day. My right hon. Friend the Lord Advocate, James Wolffe QC, also attended the Council.

Interior day (13 October) began with an update from the presidency on the implementation of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency regulation. The agency was launched on 6 October. The UK does not participate in this measure.

The Council then discussed IT measures related to border management. The presidency encouraged member states to stress to their MEPs the importance of agreeing the regulation on systematic border checks quickly due to the ongoing risk from foreign fighters. The presidency also highlighted the entry-exit system (EES) as an important security measure and announced that a proposal on the new EU travel information and authorisation system (ETIAS) would be published by the Commission in late October. The Commission noted that a proposal revising the second generation Schengen information system (SIS II) would be published before the end of this year. The UK will not participate in systematic checks, ETIAS or EES as they are Schengen- building measures. The UK participates in SIS II.

The Commission provided an update on the implementation of agreed migration measures, including hotspots, reception conditions, asylum processing and
returns. I reiterated the UK’s commitment to supporting efforts to address the migration crisis and increase security across the EU, with a particular focus on upstream migration and the effectiveness of returns.

Over lunch, Ministers discussed developing partnership frameworks with third countries to manage migration to the EU, and issues relating to temporary internal Schengen borders.

The Council then turned to the reform of the common European asylum system (CEAS) and the resettlement framework. The presidency outlined its proposed approach, which would focus on the Eurodac and EU Asylum Agency (EUAA) proposals in particular. The Council agreed that the current Eurodac proposal should aim to simplify law enforcement access to Eurodac. The UK supports this approach.

Under any other business, there were updates on a Belgian project on returns (EURES CRIM), and from the presidency on the ministerial conference of the Prague process held on 19 and 20 September in Bratislava.

Justice day (14 October) started with a discussion on the protection of the Union’s financial interests directive (PIF), specifically the inclusion of VAT fraud in the directive. The presidency concluded that the majority of member states supported the inclusion of certain serious cross-border VAT fraud in the PIF directive. The UK does not participate in PIF.

The Commission presented a cost-benefit analysis of the European Public Prosecutor’s Office (EPPO), concluding that the benefits would significantly outweigh the costs. The presidency concluded that there was “broad conceptual support” for the four provisions under discussion: relationship with Eurojust; judicial review; relations with third countries; and relations with non-participating member states. The presidency aims to reach agreement on the Council position on EPPO at the December JHA Council. The UK will not participate in the EPPO.

At lunch, the presidency led a discussion on the role of Eurojust in combating terrorism, with a focus on data sharing.

Under any other business, the presidency updated Ministers on current legislative proposals and the Commission presented a note on hate crime in the EU. The Policing Minister supported the Commission’s message that hate crime has no place in our society and set out UK measures to combat hate crime.
Petitions

Monday 10 October 2016

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts

The petition of residents of Derby North,

Declares that as a result of the way in which the 1995 Pension Act and the 2011 Pension Act were implemented, women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age; further that hundreds of thousands of women have had significant changes imposed on them with little or no personal notice; further that implementation took place faster than promised; further that this gave no time to make alternative pension plans; and further that retirement plans have been shattered with devastating consequences.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

And the petitioners remain, etc. /  

The petition of residents of Derbyshire South,

Declares that as a result of the way in which the 1995 Pension Act and the 2011 Pension Act were implemented, women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age; further that hundreds of thousands of women have had significant changes imposed on them with little or no personal notice; further that implementation took place faster than promised; further that this gave no time to make alternative pension plans; and further that retirement plans have been shattered with devastating consequences.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

And the petitioners remain, etc. /  

OBSERVATIONS

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Closure of Lancashire’s Libraries and Museums

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.—[Presented by Graham Jones, Official Report, 20 July 2016; Vol. 613, c. 929.] /  

Observations by The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley):

The Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964 (the Act) makes it a statutory requirement that every local authority provides a comprehensive and efficient library service. Local authorities must determine how best to provide a comprehensive and efficient public library service for local people, within available resources.

The Act requires the Secretary of State to superintend, and promote the improvement of, the public library service provided by local authorities in England, and to secure the proper discharge by local authorities of the functions in relation to libraries as conferred on them as library authorities.

Public libraries are a valuable resource for all members of the public. There is an ongoing library service in England, with 3,076 public libraries and £713.9 million invested by Councils in 2014/15. In the same year there were 224.6 million visits to libraries and 190.9 million book loans in England.

Further, public libraries have the ability to support the transformation of individuals, communities and society as a whole. The range of outcomes they help to achieve is substantial and varied. However, in response to the challenges they face public libraries are modernising and innovating to stay relevant and meet the changing demands of their communities.

Our support of public libraries is why the Government and the Local Government Association established the Libraries Taskforce in 2015. The Taskforce has already published Toolkits and case studies to assist local authorities and consulted on a draft vision for public libraries, “Libraries Deliver: an Ambition for Libraries in England 2016—2021”. It is expected that this will be finalised and published soon, and will provide a range of practical and innovative options local authorities can deploy to maintain and transform library services. The Government wants local authorities to work with us and their local communities to consider the options available and ensure library services are sustainable for the long term.

Lancashire County Council has been considering library service changes for some time. In January this year the Council undertook a four-week consultation, about proposals and to gather information on how the library service was being used. The proposals included reducing the statutory service from 74 static libraries to 34 libraries. Following consideration of the feedback, the Council issued a second consultation which closed on 14 August. This included proposals to deliver 44 libraries in its statutory public library service, comprising of 37 staffed and resourced libraries, together with seven unstaffed satellite libraries where people could use self-service counters.

The proposed service was to include six mobile library vehicles, a home library service, and the virtual library service.

Lancashire County Council also noted interest from some communities in taking responsibility for buildings and / or taking over the running of a service which the Council no longer proposed to maintain. It invited expressions of interest as part of the consultation.

The Council has considered the feedback to this consultation and revised proposals that included provision of 39 fully staffed and five satellite libraries were put to and agreed by the Council Cabinet on 8 September.
The Council intended to close three libraries in Hyndburn - Clayton-le-Moors, Oswaltwistle Library and Rishton Library. Clayton-le-Moors and Oswaltwistle due to close on 30 September, with Rishton to close between 1 October and 30 November 2016.

Council officers are currently considering the viability of business cases submitted by volunteers to take on the running of each of these libraries and are due to report to the Council Cabinet at its meeting on 6 October. Should the business cases be deemed viable we understand Independent Community Libraries may be established at these locations.

The Department has recently received representations raising concerns that Lancashire County Council may, as a consequence of the changes to its public library service, fail to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service. The representations are being treated as a formal complaint under section 10 (1) (a) of the Act and the Minister for Civil Society has therefore written to Lancashire County Council to inform them. The Department will seek relevant information regarding the proposed changes to the library services, to enable my careful consideration as to whether a local inquiry is necessary to resolve any real doubt about the Council’s compliance with its statutory duty under the Act.

**Restoration of the Wellington Monument in Taunton Deane**

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.—[Presented by Rebecca Pow, Official Report, 20 July 2016; Vol. 613, c. 928.]

Observations by The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Karen Bradley):

The National Trust is responsible for the Wellington Monument having acquired it in the early 1930’s. They are committed to the future of the monument and the repair option they plan to undertake will safeguard it for future generations.

The Monument was built in several stages and to varying degrees of quality, so the need for, and cost of, a longer-term solution for the monument has long been a challenge for the National Trust. In order to understand the causes of the deterioration and develop a repair plan the National Trust have already invested significant professional time and over £150,000 in surveys, this has included costing and evaluating several repair options.

Their estimate for the total cost of a repair project, which will include engaging the local community and wider public, is £4 million. To fund this, the Trust is planning to submit a first round application to the Heritage Lottery Fund this year. They are also in discussions with the War Memorials Trust and are hoping to apply for funding at the end of December.

Both the Government and the National Trust recognise that local people are keen to see the monument repaired. In addition to this petition, the National Trust have started an online survey to find out more about what people would like to do at the monument and how they might be involved. Of the 100 people who have completed it so far, more than 95% say they strongly agree with the monument being repaired, despite the steep cost.

Currently, 40,000 people visit the Monument each year. The National Trust want to use the project to ensure many more people can benefit. They want to work with the local community so they can take more ownership and provide opportunities for training and volunteering in addition to programmes of activity and events.

**WALES**

**Welsh Assembly Oath or Affirmation**

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 representatives 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.—[Presented by Kevin Brennan, Official Report, 20 July 2016; Vol. 613, c. 927.]

Observations from The Secretary of State for Wales (Alun Cairns):

The Oath of Allegiance sworn by Members of the National Assembly for Wales is a promise to be loyal to the National Assembly for Wales.

There are no plans to change the requirement for members of the National Assembly for Wales.
Petition

Tuesday 11 October 2016

PRESENTED PETITIONS
Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts

The petition of residents of Brighton, Pavilion,

Declares that as a result of the way in which the 1995 Pension Act and the 2011 Pension Act were implemented, women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age; further that hundreds of thousands of women have had significant changes imposed on them with little or no personal notice; further that implementation took place faster than promised; further that this gave no time to make alternative pension plans; and further that retirement plans have been shattered with devastating consequences.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Caroline Lucas.]

Petitions in same terms were also presented by the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale West (Mr Brady) [P001921]; the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) [P001922]; the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams) [P001924]; the right hon. Member for Chelmsford (Sir Simon Burns) [P001920]; the hon. Member for Fylde (Mark Menzies) [P001931]; the hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) [P001928]; the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Julie Elliott) [P001926]; and the hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) [P001938].

Petitions P001929, P001930, and P001933 to P001936 in the same terms were also presented.
Petition

Monday 17 October 2016

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts

The petition of Residents of Portsmouth,

Declares that as a result of the way in which the 1995 Pension Act and the 2011 Pension Act were implemented, women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pensions Age; further that hundreds of thousands of women have had significant changes imposed on them with little or no personal notice; further that implementation took place faster than promised; further that this gave no time to make alternative pension plans; and further that retirement plans have been shattered with devastating consequences.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase in the State Pension Age.

And the petitioners remain, etc.
Petition

Tuesday 18 October 2016

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts

The petition of residents of Rothwell and Elmett,
Declares that as a result of the way in which the 1995 Pension Act and the 2011 Pension Act were implemented, women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age; further that hundreds of thousands of women have had significant changes imposed on them with little or no personal notice; further that implementation took place faster than promised; further that this gave no time to make alternative pension plans; and further that retirement plans have been shattered with devastating consequences.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Alec Shelbrooke.]
Petition

Wednesday 19 October 2016

PRESENTED PETITIONS

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Acts

The petition of residents of Stockport,

Declares that as a result of the way in which the 1995 Pension Act and the 2011 Pension Act were implemented, women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age; further that hundreds of thousands of women have had significant changes imposed on them with little or no personal notice; further that implementation took place faster than promised; further that this gave no time to make alternative pension plans; and further that retirement plans have been shattered with devastating consequences.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Ann Coffey.]

[P001957]

The petition of residents of Bolsover,

Declares that as a result of the way in which the 1995 Pension Act and the 2011 Pension Act were implemented, women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age; further that hundreds of thousands of women have had significant changes imposed on them with little or no personal notice; further that implementation took place faster than promised; further that this gave no time to make alternative pension plans; and further that retirement plans have been shattered with devastating consequences.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Mr Dennis Skinner.]

[P001958]
Petition

Thursday 20 October 2016

PRESENTED PETITION
Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Implementation of the 1995 and 2011 Pension Act

The petition of residents of Central Ayrshire,

Declares that as a result of the way in which the 1995 Pension Act and the 2011 Pension Act were implemented, women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age; further that hundreds of thousands of women have had significant changes imposed on them with little or no personal notice; further that implementation took place faster than promised; further that this gave no time to make alternative pension plans; and further that retirement plans have been shattered with devastating consequences.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make fair transitional arrangements for all women born in the 1950s (on or after 6 April 1951) who have unfairly borne the burden of the increase to the State Pension Age.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Dr Philippa Whitford.]
Ministerial Corrections

Monday 10 October 2016

TRANSPORT

Rail Services: Overcrowding

The following are extracts from Questions to the Secretary of State for Transport on 15 September 2016.

13. **Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What steps he is taking to reduce overcrowding on passenger rail services.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): This Government are making the biggest investment in our railways since the Victorian era, enabling more trains and longer trains to operate on many of our busiest routes. More than 563 new carriages are planned to enter service by the end of 2020.


**Andy McDonald** (Middlesbrough) (Lab): The service on Southern is officially the worst in the country, and passengers have endured appalling overcrowding for far too long. Removing hundreds of services a day has served only to exacerbate overcrowding on the services that survive. When will the Secretary of State bring to an end the misery of long-suffering passengers and intervene, or does he agree with the former Rail Minister, who effectively said that there are no circumstances that would warrant Govia Thameslink Railway being stripped of this franchise?

**Paul Maynard**: I am sure the hon. Gentleman will welcome the fact that more than two thirds of the services that were taken out of the timetable have now been put back in again. Our focus is on restoring normality to the service and putting the interests of passengers first. The service is improving on a regular basis, with more services returning to the full timetable, and I will focus on that to make sure that we get back to the full timetable.


Letter of correction from Paul Maynard:

Errors have been identified in the responses I gave to the hon. Members for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson) and for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) during Questions to the Secretary of State for Transport.

The correct response should have been:

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Paul Maynard): This Government are making the biggest investment in our railways since the Victorian era, enabling more trains and longer trains to operate on many of our busiest routes. Since 2010, more than 563 new carriages have been brought into service in England and Wales, and a further 5,032 are planned to enter service by the end of 2020.

The correct response should have been:

**Paul Maynard**: I am sure the hon. Gentleman will welcome the fact that one third of the services that were taken out of the timetable have now been put back in again. Our focus is on restoring normality to the service and putting the interests of passengers first. The service is improving on a regular basis, with more services returning to the full timetable, and I will focus on that to make sure that we get back to the full timetable.
Ministerial Corrections

Tuesday 11 October 2016

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

BBC

The following is an extract from the response to the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) during the statement on the BBC by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on 15 September 2016.

Karen Bradley: For the first time, we have made it an 11-year charter in order that it does not coincide with the electoral cycle and there cannot be seen to be political influence on the charter renewal. In addition, we want to make sure that this is the longest charter ever.


Letter of correction from Karen Bradley:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins) during my statement on the BBC.

The correct response should have been:

Karen Bradley: For the first time, we have made it an 11-year charter in order that it does not coincide with the electoral cycle and there cannot be seen to be political influence on the charter renewal. In addition, we want to make sure that this is one of the longest charters ever.

The following is an extract from the response given to the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) during the statement on the BBC by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on 15 September 2016.

Karen Bradley: As I pointed out to the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (John Nicolson), BBC Alba is a BBC service; S4C is not.

DEFENCE

Defence Procurement: Steel Industry

The following is an extract from Questions to the Secretary of State for Defence on 12 September 2016.

Christina Rees: Now that Government Departments are mandated to provide information about the proportion of UK steel used in the Crown Commercial Service, will the Minister please tell the House what percentage of UK steel is used in current defence projects and what percentage will be used in future?

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Lady rightly speaks up for steel production in her constituency. She will be very pleased to know that, for the largest project that the UK Government have ever procured that uses steel—she will be aware that that is the carrier programme currently under construction on the Clyde—the vast majority comes from Tata Steel. I believe it is 94%.


Letter of correction from Harriett Baldwin:

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Neath (Christina Rees) during Questions to the Secretary of State for Defence.

The correct response should have been:

Harriett Baldwin: The hon. Lady rightly speaks up for steel production in her constituency. She will be very pleased to know that, for the largest project that the UK Government have ever procured that uses steel—she will be aware that that is the carrier programme currently under construction in Rosyth—the vast majority comes from Tata Steel. I believe it is 95,000 tonnes.
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